

## FELINDRE'S FORTUNE

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## Chapter 1

### *Distant Early Warning*

The needle travelled across the graph paper serenely in a perfectly straight, perfectly unblemished line. Not a twitch, not a flicker of motion. Hour after hour.

Until...

A tiny, tiny irregularity appeared. If anyone had been watching it, the needle would hardly have seemed to move. Almost immediately the black line it was tracing resumed its ruler-like perfection. But then there was another little jump. Then a slight swing from one side to the other.

An amber light began to flash.

Seven Two Two Ghyron caught the moving colour in the corner of his eye, and looked up alertly. Then he leapt up from his desk and strode over to the row of seismographs that lined the wall of his laboratory, staring at the graph paper on the fourth one from the left.

The needle was beginning to oscillate quite noticeably now, with only brief pauses between movements.

“Not another one!” Ghyron muttered under his breath, his otherwise pleasant and open face distorted by the concerned frown furrowing between his eyebrows. “What’s going *on*...?”

Suddenly the needle went wild, audibly emitting a scratching sound as it swung swiftly from side to side in huge sweeps. The amber light ceased and the red light above it took over, flashing even more urgently.

Watching the manic needle and the flurry of black lines, Ghyron gripped the sides of the machine as though by doing so he could make it stop, make it steady. *As if*, he told himself, derisively. But there was nothing else he could do, while he waited for the tremor to finish registering.

It was at least another two minutes before the frenzied oscillations died away and the needle resumed an undisturbed progress across the graph.

Ghyron released his grip on the seismograph and swung away, almost immediately pivoting on his heels to look back at the machine, the fingers of both hands tugging through the mass of light brown curls that crowned his head in a gesture of frustration.

“Why are you doing this?” he demanded. “How *can* you be doing it? Why’s it getting worse every time?”

*Listen to yourself. Shouting protests at an inanimate machine, he thought. Trying to deny your suspicions. Because you know nobody’d believe you if you told them why you think this is happening. But if it’s true –!*

He looked miserably at the seismographs.

There was no way round it. He’d have to tell someone. No matter how incredible it sounded.

*Because if it’s true, we’re all headed for a terrible disaster.*

\*

A few days later, Planetary Administrator One Four Three Zarramin slowly placed the report he’d been reading onto his desk and stared at it, his mind racing to encompass all the implications of what he’d just learned.

They were profound. Literally life-changing. For Felindre, this unique planet of which he was the appointed administrator. And, in a very different way, for himself.

Carefully, meticulously, he thought each one through to its logical conclusion, and drew all the strands together into a single decision. He sat contemplating that decision for a long time.

Then, slowly, he stretched out his hand and pressed the control of the internal communications network that would summon the member of his staff that he needed to speak to.

“Seven Two Two Ghyron,” came the response.

“Ah, Ghyron... Administrator Zarramin here. I’ve just finished reading your report. I think we need to talk over some of its content. Could you come to my office, please?”

“Of course, Administrator. I’ll be right there...”

In his laboratory, Ghyron closed his communicator off and sat back in his chair, running both hands through his hair with his characteristic gesture.

His colleague, Nine Three One Cyraenie, noticed it, and the anxious frown on his face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Zarramin wants to talk to me about a report I've sent in," he said, pensively.

"Why? I mean, why are you looking so worried about it?" She looked at him with concerned blue eyes, brushing a lock of her shoulder-length fair hair out of them in order to do so.

"Because there are things in it he isn't going to like," said Ghyron even more slowly. "That a lot of people aren't going to like. If I'm right. I knew that when I submitted it."

"Why, what's it about? Does Laryan know about it?"

"Not yet. I'm going to talk it through with him as soon as he gets back from the observatory. And I think" – he paused – "I think I'd better not tell *you*. Not just yet. Not until I've cleared it with Zarramin."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Sounds serious," she said lightly.

"It could be," he agreed. "Very... If I'm right," he repeated. He suddenly looked at her; rather strangely, she thought.

"In fact, Cy, I think I want you to promise you won't tell anyone – apart from Laryan – that I mentioned it," he said, and it was evident he was in earnest.

"All right," she said, her puzzlement evident in her tone. "If you don't want me to, I won't."

"Promise! Really promise!" he insisted, apparently unaware how childlike his phrasing sounded. But there was no mistaking his intensity. "No-one! Not until I tell you it's safe."

"*Safe*? What do you –" She broke off at the look on his face. "All right, I promise!" she repeated. "Truly."

He accepted her words with a nod, then looked away and stared with unfocused eyes into the middle distance for a few moments. Cyraenie looked at him with real concern; it wasn't like Ghyron to be this worried about *anything*. He was dedicated and serious as a scientist, but as a person his manner was usually lighthearted and cheerful. His expression and tone at this moment were completely out of character. For no good reason, she found herself wishing that Professor Laryan had been here, now, and not making a field trip to Observatory Four...

She saw Ghyron's fingers close almost absently around the tiny wooden figure that always stood on his desk. It was a carved figurine of a soobit – a small arboreal mammal that was one of the vast range of Felindrean fauna, and painted with a characteristic pattern of brownish-grey and cream stripes. He'd made it himself; he was a very talented amateur artist. Cyraenie had seen the whole collection of his artwork, the figures of birds, insects and animals he kept in his quarters, or sometimes gave to colleagues as gifts. Yet she still found this one little animal a rather endearing thing for him to keep always by him, on his desk.

Suddenly he turned his customary bright smile on her, and got up, shoving the soobit into his pocket.

"Oh, well, I'd better answer the summons," he said. "Wish me luck!"

"All right, but I don't suppose you need it, really," she said, turning back to her own desk.

He paused as he got to the door, and gave her another strange look.

"Actually – I do," he contradicted. "We all do." And went out, leaving her staring after him with a furrowed brow.

\*

A couple of minutes later, the communicator on Zarramin's desk sprang into life.

"Administrator?" came the prim, efficient tones of Four Five Nine Helenay, his personal assistant. "Seven Two Two Ghyron is here to see you. He says you asked him to come? He doesn't have an appointment." She sounded faintly indignant, as if Zarramin had no right to make any kind of arrangement in which she was not

involved. He sighed, silently. Sometimes he found Helenay's unfailing efficiency a little wearing, despite its extreme usefulness to him.

"Thank you, Helenay. Yes, I did ask him to come to see me – sorry I forgot to mention it," he apologized smoothly. "Can you send him in, please...? Ah, there you are! Thank you for coming so promptly, Ghyron," he said pleasantly as the door opened to admit the young scientist. He waved him to a seat on the other side of his desk. "I appreciate you've probably got a lot on your mind. Particularly in the light of your report."

Ghyron nodded, glumly.

"You're sure about the accuracy of your findings? Quite sure?" The Planetary Administrator tapped the papers on the desk in front of him with a delicately extended middle finger.

Ghyron nodded again.

"As sure as I can be," he said, grimly.

Zarramin regarded the young scientist thoughtfully.

"But you've consulted your colleagues about this, of course? Forgive me – obviously, I'm a bureaucrat, not a scientist" – he smiled thinly – "but even as a layman, it strikes me that it is a rather – well, *unusual* theory that you're proposing here."

"Very tactful, Administrator. You mean bizarre, don't you?" said Ghyron, with a brief, wry smile. "But, no, I haven't told anyone else. Not yet. I thought you ought to know first. As soon as possible. But I'm going to run it past Professor Laryan, too. If he confirms my findings – well..." He shrugged, as if to indicate there'd be no further basis for doubt.

"But at the moment no-one else knows about this, other than we two?" Zarramin persisted.

The younger man cast a quick and rather wary glance at him.

"Not yet," he repeated.

"Very wise," Zarramin approved. "In the circumstances such reticence is extremely laudable. You've shown sound judgement in this matter, Ghyron. It would have been irresponsible in the extreme to publish this generally without first undergoing at least some form of peer review. Of course, if, as you expect, Professor Laryan agrees with your findings – well, he is one of the most respected scientists in the Omoron Hegemony..." He fixed the young scientist with an unwavering gaze and added, with just the slightest trace of emphasis, "I know I can trust you to maintain that state of affairs for the present."

Ghyron nodded, but there was a hint of uneasiness in his manner. Zarramin noted it, and wondered if he'd somehow given Ghyron a clue to what lay behind his words. He continued to regard the younger man as if he'd noticed nothing.

"But if I *am* right, the situation'll be terribly urgent, Administrator," Ghyron said anxiously. "We'll need to consider measures almost immediately, won't we?"

"Yes, you're right, of course. Where is Professor Laryan at the moment?" Zarramin enquired.

"Observatory Four. He's due back in three days. I was going to talk it over with him then, but time's so terribly short, I'm beginning to wonder if I ought to get in touch with him anyway. There's a lot at stake."

"Indeed there is," Zarramin agreed. "And of course you must get in touch with the Professor. But I'd like to be present when you do so – obviously, as Planetary Administrator, I have a great deal invested in the outcome of the discussion. So could you wait until I come to you? Say, this evening? When I've had a little more time to plan potential courses of action?"

He paused, thoughtfully, then continued, "And in the meantime, Ghyron, to ensure the security of this information, I'd like you to take some time out of the laboratory. Stay in your quarters. Not that I mean to imply that you'd deliberately let anything fall in conversation, but it can be so easily done without intent. With a matter of such importance, I think it would be wise to make absolutely sure nothing of that sort could happen. Don't you agree?"

Ghyron cast him another quick glance. Zarramin found it hard to deduce what he was thinking.

“And then, when Professor Laryan has been informed,” he continued, “you can be sure there will have been not the slightest chance of anyone else suffering – shall we say undue concern? – about this matter. Until we’re completely sure that that concern is justified.”

Ghyron nodded, and in obedience to his implied dismissal, rose to leave. But he still looked uneasy. When he got to the door, he looked back at Zarramin, as if he was studying him for some reason, or was about to say something further.

Zarramin looked back at him, with slightly raised eyebrows.

“Was there something else?” he enquired.

Ghyron locked eyes with him, briefly.

“No, sir,” he said. Then he left.

Zarramin regarded the shut door steadily for some moments. Then he leaned forward to his communicator again. Using his confidential circuit. The one even Helenay couldn’t access. The one only he, as Planetary Administrator, could use.

The one he used when he wanted to maintain absolute secrecy.

## **Chapter 2**

### ***Intriguing Discoveries***

In the TARDIS, an issue of immense and universal importance was being debated.

“Who do you think I’m most like, then?” the Doctor asked, tilted back on the pilot’s chair with his feet propped on the console. Finn Thornton was leaning back against it, facing him, her arms folded.

“We-e-ell,” she said consideringly, “you’ve certainly got Moomintroll’s love of adventure. But out of all the characters in the Moomin books Snufkin’s always been my favourite. Loves nature, and always keeps his head in a crisis.”

“That’s very me,” the Doctor agreed.

“Also,” Finn went on, “something of a nomad and a rebel against authority. That’s very you, as well! But” – she wrinkled her nose – “you’re too extrovert to really be Snufkin. You’re more a combination of the Hemulen and Little My. Interested in everything, and up for anything. That’s *definitely* you.”

“Oi! The Hemulen wears a dress! And I’m too tall for Little My,” the Doctor objected. “Still...” He made a sideways dip of his head that implied he was allowing the similarities she was suggesting. “What about you, then?” he challenged. “Who would you be?”

Finn gave the matter grave consideration.

“Probably the Dweller Under The Sink,” she pronounced at last.

“Hmm. A furry, incomprehensible, irritable loner with bushy eyebrows and a tail. Not sure I’d *really* recognize you from that description,” the Doctor demurred.

“Maybe not,” Finn conceded cheerfully, with a shrug. “Though I bet you find what *I* say incomprehensible at times...!” She grinned at him. “But I’ve always had a soft spot for him as a concept. ‘The Dweller Under The Sink’,” she repeated, with relish. “Such a wonderful idea, isn’t it?”

They were interrupted by the sound of the TARDIS preparing to land. The Doctor whipped his feet back onto the floor and leapt up.

“We’re there!” he announced, unnecessarily. “Come on! You’re going to love this!”

“Why? Where are we?” Finn asked, following him like a leaf sucked into the vortex of a passing gust of wind.

“Somewhere I heard about not long ago. Final stop on the tour. The *pièce de résistance*! Definitely worth a visit, by the sound of it,” the Doctor informed her. He opened the door and held it for her, making a grand sweeping gesture with his free hand to indicate that she should precede him. Wearing an expression of anticipation, she stepped outside.

Her jaw dropped in amazement; she just stood and stared. The Doctor came and stood beside her, his hands thrust into his pockets, and did much the same.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful," Finn said at last, in hushed tones of awe.

"Well, I've seen a fair few places in my time, but, I have to say, this one is definitely a contender for top of the list," agreed the Doctor, pulling at his left earlobe as he surveyed the view.

"Where is this?"

"The planet of Felindre. In the Omaron Tegwith galaxy. Only explored for the first time a few years ago. Felindre, I mean, not the galaxy. It's right on the outer edge, so it took them a while to get round to noticing it. Now they've found it, it's been designated a CBOB."

"A see-bob? What's that?"

"A 'C – B – O – B'," the Doctor explained, spelling out the letters of the acronym one at a time. "Celestial Body of Outstanding Beauty."

"Oh. Well, I can see why," Finn agreed. "I thought Ametrine was beautiful, but *this* place –!" She broke off, shaking her head in wonder.

After the particularly unpleasant experiences she and the Doctor had recently undergone in what they'd dubbed the 'Mind Machine', resulting in their grim duel with the entity they knew only as the Voice, the Doctor had decided they both needed an antidote to those events, and had been taking her on a tour of some of the most beautiful places he knew. This one was evidently new to him as well as to her, but it certainly felt as if they'd hit a real jackpot this time. She went back to staring at the vista around her.

The TARDIS had landed on a long, low ridge; immediately behind them the sea, before them a bowl-shaped valley enclosed by a circle of hills. More hills, line after line of them, marched into the distance, growing in size and stature until they became snow-capped mountains on the horizon.

At the far lip of the valley a waterfall fell like a curtain of white lace into a modestly-sized lake before the water flowed as a small river across the bowl and out through a gap in the ridge on their left to meet the sea. The valley's main form of vegetation seemed to be grass, whereas the hills and mountains were forested on every available surface. Exotic flowers rioted everywhere.

What made the scene even more beautiful to her eyes than an equivalent on Earth would have done was the fact that the foliage of the trees was not confined to variations on the theme of green, though a great many of them were. But the others were the most wonderful pastel shades of all the colours of the rainbow – gentle blues, understated pinks, delicate yellows, subtle mauves, and every other colour you could imagine, spread throughout the whole view, each colour merging into the next. It was like looking at an entire planet coloured from the palette of Thomas Kinkadee or Hong Leung.

And when she turned round to look behind her, at the sea, it was a more beautiful blue than any ocean she had ever seen; aquamarine where it lapped over the white sand of the beach, shading to rich cobalt further out. Small islands, each surrounded by its ring of white sand, bloomed with the same multi-hued pastel shades of foliage as the land did. The arch of sky above was an equally incredible cerulean blue, the occasional puff of white cloud drawing the eye, while the sun warmed everything to what felt like the ideal temperature.

"I don't suppose there's really any such thing as paradise," Finn sighed after a while. "Or perfection. But this has got to come as close as anything does."

"Ye-e-es," the Doctor agreed, somehow managing to convey a multitude of reactions with that one elongated syllable. "Fancy a walk?" He nodded toward the valley.

"Yes, but – can I just go and take a quick look at the beach first? Since we're so near? Won't be long," Finn promised. "But I can't be this close and *not* have a look! Please?"

"Okay – off you go," said the Doctor. "With you in a minute."

She threw him a grateful smile and ran down the slope of the ridge and onto the sand. At the water's edge she halted, then began examining the sand at her feet – the Doctor could see minor items of marine debris and the occasional pebble or stone in which she was taking an interest.

The Doctor turned to shut the TARDIS door, but didn't follow her immediately. Instead, he leaned back against the TARDIS, folding his arms, and watched her with a tolerant – even fond – smile. He found himself thinking, as he followed her progress; about himself and her. The two of them. Assessing their history – relatively short though it had been, so far – and their relationship.

What made Finn different from the others, so special to him in her own singular way? He'd seldom had a friend as readily moved to tears as she was, that was for sure! And she didn't have Rose's degree of courage, Martha's streak of independence, Donna's abrasive sassiness, Sarah Jane's instinct for investigation.

Although he wasn't being quite fair to her, thinking about it. The easy tears had never stopped her stepping up to the plate whenever he'd needed her to. She did have her own type of courage, and character, and humour, and he knew she'd follow him unquestioningly into any situation that he asked her to. But her qualities were all – in a way that he found endearingly unique to her – understated in their expression, compared to those of the others.

But that wasn't it. Not by itself...

Was it just that she understood him so well, empathized so much, because of his mind in hers? He'd probably never be able to evaluate to himself, or express to her, how important that was to him. But did she also bring to him something else, that was peculiarly her own?

Down by the water's edge, she was squatting, absorbed in examining something she'd picked up from the beach. A shell? A pebble? A bit of weathered wood? He couldn't see at this distance.

But on this trip, he'd learned that she did bring to him something all her own. And, watching her now, he could see it in action.

What she had, more than any of the others, even in the short time she'd spent with him, was a deep-seated and intense appreciation for the marvels of the physical universe.

He thought of the planets he'd shown her in the whistle-stop tour of the universe they'd been engaged in since he'd taken her to Ametrine; the flora and fauna, the landscapes, the stars, the galaxies. The way her face had lit up in sheer, unadulterated delight as he'd shared with her a spectacular view of an exploding galaxy, a tiny furry beast on a new planet, a shower of blue meteoroids through the atmosphere of another, a mile-high waterfall of liquid nitrogen, a strange and exotic flower that released its pollen in a mist of tiny water droplets...

It was his sheer joy in the discovery, or the sight, of the new and strange, the spectacular and the marvellous, that she shared to a greater degree than any of his other companions during this regeneration – and quite a few others, come to that.

When situations had arisen with people, with other species, she'd been there right beside him, valiantly doing whatever she could to help, right from that first time on Mynydd y Seren. He knew she always would, for as long as –

He broke off, shied away from the place where that idea led.

But – returning to his original train of thought – the most special moments of all had undoubtedly been whenever they were linked together in appreciating some treasure of the universe, tiny or spectacular.

Like that snowfall, back on Kvitverden...

Leaning back against the TARDIS, he found himself smiling anew as he watched her.

She rose to her feet and raised the item she'd found toward the sun, looking at it intently; he heard her draw in her breath quickly. Then she looked up at him, and smiled brilliantly. She brandished the object above her head.

"Doctor, look at this!" she called excitedly, like an enthusiastic child, and began to run toward him, eager to share it with him. He found himself smiling even more broadly as he pushed himself away from the door and went to join her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know, but it's *beautiful*! Hold it up to the light!" She held it out for his inspection.

It was a pebble about the size of his thumb joint, polished smooth by the action of sea and sand. It was transparent, like a piece of glass, and looked quite unremarkable until he did as she said and held it up to the

light. Once he did, it was filled with intense colour, as the sun's rays diffracted spectacularly through the internal structure of the stone, like hundreds of tiny prisms broadcasting their rainbows.

"Nice!" he approved, squinting at it with appreciation before returning it to her. "What else is down there?"

"Come and take a look," she suggested, joyously tossing the pebble in the air before storing it in one of her pockets.

Within a few minutes he found himself as absorbed as Finn in beachcombing along the tideline, examining the small but new treasures to be found there.

After a while, Finn remarked, "You know, I'm getting a bit thirsty. Can I just go back in the TARDIS and grab a drink before we do anything else?"

The Doctor, absorbed in his scrutiny of a tiny and fascinating shell, trying to work out what kind of creature it had originally housed, grunted an absent assent. It was only when he heard Finn mutter to herself, "Oh, you fool!" – clearly addressing herself, not him – that he looked up.

She had reached the TARDIS, but was standing with her back to the door, looking down at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked, before realizing the answer. Of course. She couldn't get in. For a perfectly obvious reason. He stood up, and began to walk up the slope toward her to remedy the problem, rummaging in his pocket.

"Ex-cuse me!" she replied indignantly. "No key, remember? I can't open the door just like that, you know!" And on the word 'that', she snapped her fingers.

Instantly, the TARDIS doors swung open.

The Doctor halted abruptly, and they both stared.

Silent astonishment reigned for several seconds. Then Finn turned her startled eyes toward the Doctor, as he slowly began to move up the slope again until he stood beside her. She was wearing that look she got when one of his memories surfaced in her mind. He could almost see the scenario playing out in her head: River Song in the Library, telling him the doors could be opened that way – and doing it himself, for the first time, to see Donna waiting inside for him.

"Does she – does that happen for everyone?" Finn asked, dumbfounded.

"No, it does *not*," said the Doctor, even more astounded by the implications than she was.

They stared at each other for a few more seconds. Then Finn turned and quickly went in and up the ramp. The Doctor followed her.

She came to a stop in front of the console, then put out her hand to touch it, as she so often did.

"Thank you," she said softly, looking up at the Time Rotor. "I'm honoured."

That was something else Finn did that hardly anyone else had ever done. She always spoke to, and about, the TARDIS as if it was a person. Always referred to it as 'you' or 'she' or 'her'. Maybe it was his mind in Finn's that the TARDIS was responding to. Or maybe it had simply been listening to her, and making its own judgements...

Either way, it was a thought-provoking development.

"Still want that drink?" he asked. It was easier to talk about the small things than the big things, sometimes...

"Yeah, but I think I might make it a brandy," she said, with the ghost of a grin, as she exited the control room. "A medicinal one. For the shock!"

### **Chapter 3**

#### ***Chrysalis***

Half an hour later, Finn was already running out of superlatives for the experiences Felindre was giving her.

As she and the Doctor had walked across the valley to the lake, they'd found that the grass released a delicate but gorgeous scent as they brushed through it, and the flowers that thrust up everywhere did their best to compete. Strange but beautiful birds flew overhead from time to time, colourful and exotic as any on Earth.



Their calls, while unfamiliar, were also beautiful. Felindre seemed to be doing its utmost to satisfy every one of her five senses.

Now, standing on the edge of the lake, looking at the waterfall, she could see that the cliff was not pure rock, but lined with veins of quartz, and everywhere points of light sparkled where the sun fell on it. Delicate plants with leaves like filigree grew in every crevice, and what looked like small birds swooped and hovered over the whole cliff face, even flying through the falling water.

The Doctor had dropped to his haunches and was subjecting the various rocks and stones at the edge of the water to close scrutiny. Lots of them, too, sparkled in the sunlight, and he was holding each one up close to his face, squinting intently.

“Found something interesting?” Finn enquired, recognizing the signs.

The Doctor tossed her the lump of quartz he had in his hand.

“See anything there you recognize?” he asked.

Finn looked at it carefully. Small, shining metallic flecks caught the sun as she turned it. The colour looked very familiar, but she knew it was easy to mistake the thing she was thinking of for something else.

“Copper?” she hazarded, suggesting the ‘something else’ first.

The Doctor shook his head.

“Gold, then?” she said, voicing her original suspicion.

She was surprised when he shook his head again.

“That, Fionnula Thornton, is tascenium,” he announced.

“Never heard of it,” Finn told him.

“You wouldn’t have,” he agreed. “Hasn’t been found in your time. In fact, there isn’t any in your solar system. Not even in your galaxy, come to that. But about a thousand years in your future, and in another galaxy, far, far away from yours, it gets discovered. Tascenium. The hardest workable metal ever identified. An engineer’s dream material for some things. But very, *very* rare. Except, apparently, here.” He scanned the stones around him thoughtfully. “If this place is anything to go by, this planet must be loaded with it.”

“Wow,” said Finn, making round, respectful eyes at the piece of quartz before she tossed it into the lake. “That’d make a decent bit of pocket money for somebody, then. Hope nobody’s noticed!”

The Doctor’s silence didn’t have a particularly encouraging quality to it, she noticed. Understandably. Humans didn’t have a very good record when it came to plundering planets of their resources.

“Won’t this CBOB status thing protect it?” she asked, trying to sound hopeful.

“In theory,” the Doctor agreed, but his tone of voice was no more encouraging than his silence had been. Then he smiled. “Hope so, anyway. Right! Come on!”

He got to his feet and headed for the forest on their left.

Finn was so close on his heels that she nearly bumped into him when he stopped without warning.

“What –?” she began, but he abruptly raised a hand, silencing her. His face was a study of concentration. He was staring at the forest, but when she followed his line of sight, there was nothing untoward to be seen. Then she realized he just happened to be staring in that direction; his eyes weren’t actually focused on anything in front of him. He was concentrating on something else.

His head began to move in strange gestures, first looking down and to his right, then straight ahead and slightly up, then over his left shoulder, almost as if he were a scanner trying to locate a target. Then his hand shot into one of his pockets and wrested his stethoscope out of it. He shoved the earpieces into his ears and then unexpectedly dropped flat to the ground, pressing the chestpiece against the rock underneath him, shutting his eyes tight to cut out any distraction while he listened.

Finn stayed silent, and as still as she could, intent on not disrupting such fierce concentration. Only when he opened his eyes, jumped up and stuffed the stethoscope back into his pocket did she ask, “What’s wrong?”

He frowned at her; not because she’d asked the question, but because of the answer.

“Earthquake,” he told her.

“I didn’t feel anything!”

“Oh, very, very distant,” he said, dismissing with a wave of his hand the fact that she wasn’t as sensitive to such things as he was. “But definitely an earthquake. And there was something” – he paused, searching for the right word – “*odd* about it.”

“What?”

He stood with his hands thrust into his pockets for a few moments, deep in thought, and didn’t answer. Then he looked up and beamed at her brightly. “Never mind. Over, now! Go on, shall we?” He invited her attention to the forest with a wave of his hand.

“Oh, yes!” she agreed, with a very effective bit of mimicry that drew a grin out of him.

Walking through the multicoloured flora, positively glowing in the softly filtered sunlight, raised their passage from merely ‘a walk’ into the realms of magic, Finn thought. Flying insects of varying sizes, rainbow-tinged wings fluttering like moving diamonds, hovered over flowers of every conceivable shape and shade; beetles with carapaces shining with endless variations of iridescence scurried along the ground or clambered up plant stems and tree trunks.

There seemed to be a large population of small, furry, long-tailed mammals who took time from expertly traversing the trees branches to stare at them with apparently intelligent interest and then chitter to each other before moving on. Their fur was striped cream and brownish-grey; had the Doctor and Finn been aware of its existence, they’d have known they were looking at the living models for Ghyron’s soobit. Jewelled birds, too, sang and called as they flitted through the almost luminous sunbeams falling through the tree canopy. Small creatures resembling tiny deer sometimes crossed their path, looking at them wonderingly with huge, dark eyes before moving on.

“Notice anything particular about this place?” said the Doctor after a while, sauntering along with his hands in his pockets.

“Apart from its being just about the most wonderful place I’ve ever seen, you mean?” Finn prompted, fishing for a clue.

“There is that,” the Doctor agreed. “But I was thinking more about the way this ecosystem seems to be organized. If this was Earth, for instance, there’d be predators of some sort or another. And in the case of the mammals you’d know that because they’d be displaying cautionary behaviours. Nothing we’ve seen here’s behaving like that. Those deer creatures simply raised their eyebrows and moved on; never seemed to occur to them we might be dangerous. Those things in the trees are just pointing and giggling. No local equivalent of spiders or other insect predators. No evidence of carnivores of *any* genus, that I’ve spotted. And I’m very good at noticing things, me,” he pointed out. “No – nothing but vegetarians, nectar-drinkers, symbiosis and blissful ignorance of the concept of danger as far as the eye can see... Very unusual,” he concluded.

“Don’t knock it,” Finn advised him. “Nice to know somewhere in the universe’s got it right, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I do,” the Doctor assured her. “It’s just – *unusual*,” he repeated. “To see it all working together so harmoniously to quite such a degree. But not knocking it. *Definitely* not knocking it –”

He suddenly broke off, as his eye caught something.

“Oooh! Now! What’s that?” he asked, and suddenly angled off to the right through a patch of knee-high, pale green fern-like plants.

“What’s what?” Finn questioned, following him.

“That,” said the Doctor, suddenly stopping and pointing.

“Oh!” Finn couldn’t prevent her exclamation of surprise.

The thing lay in a space in the ferns which so exactly matched its shape that one could be forgiven for thinking they’d been grown specifically to enclose it. It was a huge, glistening, pale brown shape some five feet long and perhaps two feet wide, tapering to a sharp point at one end with a blunter bulge at the other. It looked as if its texture would be something like soft leather or suede.

“Now that’s what I call a chrysalis!” said the Doctor, with approval.

“A chrysalis?” Finn echoed, startled – one that size was completely out of her experience.

“Oh, yes! And the occupant’s about to emerge, by the look of it,” said the Doctor cheerfully, pointing. Finn realized he was right; whatever was inside was stirring with increasing vigour, making ripples move across the surface.

She made a deliberate effort to fight down her instinctive human reaction of fear of the unknown: hadn’t the Doctor just been telling her this was an ecosystem without predators? She glanced at him, uncertainly, but he was just standing there with a look of excited anticipation. Well, if *he* wasn’t worried...!

Even so, she couldn’t prevent her spontaneous reaction of clutching at his arm when, all of a sudden, a huge split tore the length of the chrysalis. He grinned at her and patted her hand on his sleeve like a parent reassuring their nervous child, then went back to watching the occupant emerge, lit by the sunshine pouring down on it from above.

They watched, spellbound, as the creature slowly pushed its long, slender body upright, straightening on its delicate legs, each with two joints, one effectively creating a foot, the other something over halfway up the leg, the equivalent of a human’s knee. There were five pairs of legs, spread out either side to support the body – no, four: the fifth set of two limbs nearest the head were smaller, and ended in what could only be described as three-fingered hands, each finger tapering to exquisitely fine points.

From the bulge of the pale mauve torso, just behind the head, slowly unfurling to spread up and outwards, extended two double wings, closer in shape to those of a butterfly than a dragonfly. The majority of the wing area was transparent, shot through with delicate veins – veins that took their colour from the mauve and green borders around the edges. But it was the head that was more remarkable than anything else. Or, more accurately, the face.

Because the creature had a face. Not that of an insect. Admittedly there were two long, delicate antennae extending from the top of its head, but there were no bulging compound eyes, no proboscis. Instead, the round face, a pale biscuit colour, was astonishingly similar in layout to a human face. It lacked a nose, but there was a small slit of a mouth, out of which an almost invisible tongue-like organ flickered occasionally.

And the eyes! They were black and featureless in themselves, and in general shaped like elongated pears with the smaller tips pointing out to the side of the head; but they changed shape in a way that recognizably denoted expression and mood. The creature seemed to be looking about it, taking in its surroundings, with an air of discovery and wonder.

Finn found she was so caught up in the moment that she was hardly breathing. Something so beautiful, bursting into the world right in front of her and the Doctor! She’d never imagined, and doubted she would ever again experience, anything like this. Instinctively wanting to share the moment more intensely, she let go of his arm and, instead, took his hand and clasped it tightly.

The movement attracted the creature’s attention, and it looked straight at them. No – at *her*. Their eyes locked. The creature stared at her for a few moments. Then the widened eyes relaxed, and it took its first tentative paces, stepping out of the discarded chrysalis, coming closer. It didn’t so much as glance at the Doctor, who was watching carefully and with wonder. It came forward until its face, which wasn’t so very much smaller than her own, was only two feet or so away from Finn’s, its eyes still gazing into hers.

And then something *really* magical happened. Because, together, its mouth moved and its eyes narrowed into what was unmistakably a smile of utter delight. And it *spoke*.

“*Felindre*,” it said, in a musical, piping voice. But was it speech? Certainly not audible speech – they were clearly hearing it telepathically, not with their ears. Something Finn would never have been able to do before meeting the Doctor and inheriting a degree of his telepathic abilities during the transfer of some of his mind into hers. But it was a more sophisticated means of communication even than that, because, although that was the only word it used, both Finn and the Doctor understood that what it was really saying was, *I greet you*.

“Telepathy,” breathed the Doctor, fascinated. “Of a sort. No sentences, no collections of words. Just the name of its world. But everything conveyed. Brilliant!” His eyes glowed with excitement. “Hello, you beautiful thing,” he said to the creature. “I’m the Doctor. And this is my friend, Finn.”

“*Felindre*,” it replied, with a different intonation, turning to look at the Doctor with a smile for a brief moment before returning its gaze to Finn again. *I am happy to meet you, my new friends.*

Finn said nothing, just stared entranced into the creature’s fathomless eyes. Then, slowly, she raised her free hand and, with the creature smiling at her, gently touched its face. Equally slowly, it raised one of its forelimbs and the three delicate fingers were laid on the skin of her cheek.

“You are so beautiful,” Finn breathed.

“*Felindre*,” the creature disclaimed. *Felindre is beautiful. I am only part of her.*

“Do you have a name?” Finn asked.

“*Felindre.*” *Felindre – I am part of her*, the creature repeated. Finn didn’t really understand what she meant by that – nor even how she knew that the creature was a ‘she’. But she did.

The creature lowered its hand and stepped back to look at them both.

“*Felindre.*” *You are my friends. I am happy to have met you. But now I must fly. I must fly in the sunlight.*

“Oh! Right! Yes! Well, don’t let us keep you,” the Doctor told her. “First flight – that’s an important occasion! Don’t want to get in your way. Off you go! Enjoy yourself! Lovely to have met you!”

The creature smiled at them.

“*Felindre.*” *I shall see you again, my friend Finn, my friend Doctor. Farewell!*

And with that, she flexed those glorious wings and was suddenly airborne, the transparent sections glistening in the sunbeams, the mauve and green borders lit to an intensity that could hardly be looked at. Swiftly she rose up toward and then through a gap in the tree canopy.

“*Felindre...!*” they heard, fading into distance. *Goodbye...!*

Then she was gone, and they were left staring at the empty scrap of blue sky into which she had vanished.

For long moments they stood stock still, held immobile by the wonder of what had just happened. Then the Doctor flexed his fingers around Finn’s, and they looked at each other.

“Well, that was worth coming to see, wasn’t it?” he observed, with a smile.

“If I were to drop down dead in the next five minutes, it would still have been worth coming, to see that,” Finn said fervently.

She was surprised by the violence of the change in the Doctor’s expression; suddenly he was frowning at her.

“Don’t say things like that,” he said abruptly, and dropped her hand as if it had suddenly burned him.

“What?” she asked, mystified.

“About dying,” he said, almost angrily.

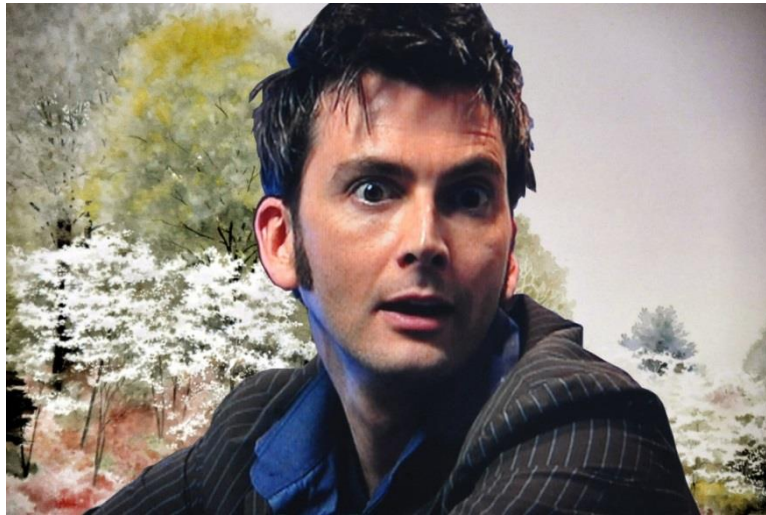
“Sorry – it was only a figure of speech,” she said, all her joy evaporating. “I didn’t mean to upset you!”

She could almost see the effort it took him to recapture the original mood.

“Of course you didn’t,” he agreed, and smiled at her. “Don’t take any notice of me. It’s all right. Really.” He dropped to his haunches, ostensibly examining the discarded chrysalis. But Finn watched him with a puzzled frown.

There was something going on in his head that she didn’t understand. Why would that particular phrase, used in that context, upset him so? He was pretending it didn’t matter, but it obviously did.

What she didn’t know was why.



## Chapter 4

### *The Airbridge*

In the Complex (its full nomenclature was the Institute for Planetary Research Felindre Foundation Complex, but of course nobody was ever going to recite that in full when they could simply say ‘the Complex’), Nine Three One Cyraenie, her work shift over, was making her way to her private quarters in the accommodation block.

She was unaware that her face was wearing a rather anxious frown as she traversed the corridors to the door of her apartment. She was really beginning to be worried, but she didn’t know what to do about it – or even whether she should, yet. Perhaps she should wait a little longer – just until tomorrow...

She placed her palm on the biometric panel beside the door, and it slid open in response. Slowly she walked in, deep in thought, still wrestling with her dilemma.

A couple of hours later, she decided she really must make a concerted effort to put her concern aside. For the time being, at any rate. Perhaps she should update her personal journal instead. That would be something to do, something to distract her. Now, where had she put it...? It was only a small device, and she was often mislaying it. Where had she used it last? Probably in her bedroom.

She went to the cabinet beside her bed and pulled open the top drawer. There it was!

And so was something else, beside it. Something that shouldn’t have been there...

A small wooden figurine, gazing at her with its painted eyes.

Ghyron’s soobit.

It stood on a scrap of paper. Mystified, Cyraenie pulled it out from under the tiny creature and looked at nine words in Ghyron’s scrawled handwriting.

*“Please keep me safe,”* it read. *“And please keep me secret.”*

Perplexed and anxious, she slowly reached down and picked up the soobit. How long had it been there?

Leaving aside the question of how Ghyron had even got into her rooms, why had he done it? Why did he suddenly want *her* to have the soobit? Why was it a secret? And where – the cause of her current anxiety – had he been for the past two days? Where was he *now*?

She stared at the tiny wooden figure as if it would answer her questions.

But its painted black eyes simply stared at her inscrutably, and told her nothing.

\*

The Doctor and Finn came upon the bridge suddenly. As they crested a rise, there it was in front of them, winding its way down from the smallish mountain now over on the left of their view, just above the treetops, curving around the shoulder of another hill and out of sight to their right.

“Ah,” said the Doctor. “The inevitable human footprint. Somebody’s here, somewhere, then.”

Finn looked at the slim, rather elegant structure. It appeared to be a single track railway of some sort, poised above the forest on slender but presumably sturdy girders. Their copper-like colour prompted her to ask, “That wouldn’t be made out of tascenium, would it?”

“Alloy of it, probably,” the Doctor agreed. “Looks as if somebody wanted to make that human footprint as light as possible, so – build your bridge as small and light and unobtrusive as you can. For which you use the strongest material you can. Top marks for consideration and aesthetics, I’d say.”

“It is a rather beautiful design,” Finn concurred.

They stood looking at it in silence for a while.

It took a few moments for Finn to register the change beneath her feet; the Doctor was aware of it before she was, and held up his hand. She looked at him, puzzled, then began to realize what he was alerting her to.

From an imperceptible beginning, the ground was beginning to shake.

Very gently at first, and then more identifiably. A vibrating sensation.

Another earthquake.

The sensation never rose beyond a gentle quiver, but there was something else. Like a far-off sound, not in her ears, but inside her head. It was so faint she couldn’t even identify what manner of sound it was. It lasted as long as the quake did; as that faded, so did the sound.

Silence fell once more. They looked at each other.

“Did you hear that?” Finn asked. “In your head?”

The Doctor nodded.

“Odd.” He repeated the word he’d used earlier. “Definitely odd...”

Then, in the pause that followed, they began to be aware of another faint sound impinging on the consciousness. But this one was definitely external. It was coming from the bottom of the hill somewhere, near the bridge.

“What is that?” Finn wondered.

“I think,” said the Doctor, with the air of someone giving the matter weighty consideration, “the right word for that is a *ululation*.”

Finn gave him an old-fashioned look. The Doctor raised his eyebrows innocently.

“Now there,” he observed, “is a face saying a whole lot of things.”

“Such as?” she enquired with exaggerated politeness.

“Ooh, it’s saying” – he squinted at it – “*I know perfectly well what a ululation is – I only said ‘What’s that’ as a rhetorical question to show I’d noticed the sound and was inviting you to comment*” – and a definite secondary implication of ‘*are we going to take a look to see what’s causing it?*’ That about cover it?”

Finn couldn’t help laughing.

“Remind me never to play poker with you,” she smiled.

“Good decision,” he approved. “Come on! We’ve got a ululation to investigate.” And he took to his heels, energetically.

A couple of minutes later, he found himself bursting out of a particularly thick cluster of the multi-hued foliage into a large clearing. After a delay of a couple of seconds, Finn emerged likewise, and stopped to survey the scene in front of them.

Much of the floor of the clearing was naked rock, though there were patches of grass and smaller plants scattered over its surface. The two feet of one of the pairs of girders that supported the bridge above them were embedded into the rock in the centre of the clearing, rising up impressively to the underside of the deck on which the track rested, some sixty feet above their heads. The bridge, swinging in a majestic curve from left to right, cast a dark shadow of its outline on the otherwise sunlit space.

Here, the sound they had heard, almost deafeningly loud before their abrupt advent, ceased for a moment, as a multitude of small eyes turned toward them. Ranged all around the clearing, squatting on their back legs, their paws held in front of their chests, were dozens and dozens of the small brown and cream furred creatures they had seen earlier. Some sat alone, some were gathered in clusters, some in pairs. They were all congregated around something that lay on the ground some yards away – something that Finn couldn't yet see clearly.

But the aura of the little animals was so unmistakably distressed, she knew it wasn't going to be anything good.

One of the soobits unexpectedly bounded across to them and stared up at them with manifest intelligence in its small, black orbs. Then it reached up with one long-fingered paw and tugged at the Doctor's trouser leg.

"Yes," the Doctor said to it, as if it had spoken. "I know. We're coming."

The rest of the soobits resumed their keening, but at a reduced level, and parted to allow the Doctor and Finn a clear pathway through to the thing that lay on the rock, in the dark shadow of the bridge.

The body of a man. The way he lay and the attitude of his splayed limbs made it very obvious most of the bones in his body must be broken. He was lying on his stomach, his head turned to one side, the undamaged side of his face clear to view, the other pressed against the rock. A mass of light-brown curls stirred gently with every air movement that encountered it.

As the Doctor dropped to one knee beside the body, he caught Finn's glance up at the bridge and her shudder, and remembered her acrophobia; she was evidently visualizing what must have happened to the dead man.

Choosing to ignore her reaction, he pulled out his glasses and put them on, and surveyed the corpse carefully. The little creatures, still keening softly, made an attentive audience; he felt a bit like a seventeenth century surgeon in the well of a lecture theatre full of observers.

Suddenly they all fell silent, their eyes and ears all turned in one direction. Finn and the Doctor looked, too; the sound of someone or something pushing through the undergrowth was rising in volume. Coming ever nearer. Instinctively Finn took closer station by the Doctor.

As if a signal had been given, every one of the tiny animals bolted for the edges of the clearing, scampering up trees and diving into bushes. Just one remained visible for a few moments, clinging to the trunk of one of the trees, its black eyes fixed on them as if it was trying to impress something on them. Then it, too, vanished from sight.

The Doctor turned his attention back to the corpse, not even looking up as a man emerged from the undergrowth and brought up short, staring at them in astonishment. Then his eyes were inevitably drawn to the dead body, and he flinched.

"Who is it?" he demanded, striding forward and coming to a stop about six feet away from them. "Is it Ghyron?"

Finn looked him over. He was a youngish man, perhaps as much as thirty years old, wearing the sort of institutional one-piece coverall she tended to associate with the forensic investigators in the police television dramas back on Earth, though this was neither white nor blue, but a pale brown. He had a pleasant countenance that was probably normally open and friendly. Now, he stared at the broken body with reluctant, horrified fascination, before tearing his eyes away to look at the two of them.

"And – who are you?" he added hesitantly, his voice slightly hoarse with shock.

Still without looking up, the Doctor pulled the wallet containing the psychic paper out of his pocket and held it up in the young man's direction. The man took a couple of steps closer and peered at it.

"You're an Interplanetary Agency Investigator?" he blurted out.

The Doctor didn't deign to answer; simply sniffed, still without looking up, and returned the psychic paper to his pocket.

"Who are *you*?" he asked, pointedly, suddenly fixing the young man with a gimlet stare.

"I'm One Four Four Ashlaik," said the discomposed subject.

“And what, exactly, are you doing here, One Four Four Ashlaik?” The Doctor rose to his full height, topping him by about four or five inches, maintaining that penetrating eye contact.

“I’m an engineer on the airbridge,” said Ashlaik. “I was sent to check a couple of the bridge girders, and – well, we all knew that Ghyron was missing. That is Seven Two Two Ghyron, isn’t it?” He cast a brief, unhappy glance at the body. “So when I heard the soobits making that strange noise, I thought I ought to come and investigate. I mean, I know what a soobit call sounds like usually, but I’ve never heard them make a racket like that! So I wondered it if might be that they’d found Ghyron, and he was injured, or something...”

His voice trailed off, and he swallowed convulsively as he considered the dreadful difference between his theory and the reality of the broken body on the rock before him.

“Right,” said the Doctor authoritatively. “Let’s get a few things straight. I’m called the Doctor. This is my assistant, Finn Thornton.” He cast her a quick glance; it suddenly occurred to him that if he’d introduced Donna, or Rose, or even Martha, like that, he’d probably have been on the receiving end of an earful.

In contrast, Finn’s eyes were simply full of amusement. Evidently her sense of her own identity was too secure to be dented by being described as his ‘assistant’. Unless that really was how she thought of herself, of course...

At any rate, it was evident he wasn’t going to catch a rocket on this occasion. Concealing his relief, he went on sternly, “And we’ve come to find out what’s going on here on Felindre.”

“Did the IfPR send you?” Ashlaik asked.

Finn tried to work out how they could get him to explain what he meant, but the Doctor was ahead of her.

“Oi! In full, please,” he said curtly. “Can’t stand acronyms.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ashlaik apologized. “I mean, the Institute for Planetary Research.”

“Course they did,” the Doctor confirmed.

“They must’ve been quick off the mark,” said Ashlaik, impressed. “Ghyron’s only been missing for two days. How did you get here so fast?”

“In the vicinity anyway,” the Doctor shrugged. “On another matter. So we were sent straight here. Think of us as a different sort of Flying Squad.” He caught Finn’s amused glance in his peripheral vision, then focused on Ashlaik again. “Only problem is, we didn’t get much of a briefing. So, One Four Four Ashlaik, I need you to tell us exactly what you know about all this. Everything. Pretend we’re complete strangers and don’t know a thing about it.”

Finn fought down her smile. Had the young man but known it, it would have been hard to better that description of them! But the Doctor’s air of authority did the trick.

“Well,” said Ashlaik slowly, thinking hard, “it’s all been a bit grapevine, really. But because there aren’t that many of us here, really, everyone sort of knows everyone – if you know what I mean? And because we’re supposed to keep only to designated areas of the planet, there are only so many places where people can be. Or are supposed to be.” He looked at the body again, unable to stop his eyes going back to it. “This isn’t one of them...”

## **Chapter 5**

### ***Cause of Death***

“How many of ‘us’ are there on Felindre?” the Doctor interrupted him. “And who, exactly, constitutes ‘us’?”

“Oh, sorry,” Ashlaik apologized again. “Well, there are about four hundred of us altogether. About half are scientists, and the rest of us are support workers for them – admin, maintenance, catering, that kind of thing. We’re here to make sure they can do their job. Studying Felindre and its moons.”

The Doctor nodded to him to go on.

“So if something happens, it doesn’t take long for word to get round,” Ashlaik continued. “And a couple of days ago, according to Cyraenie, Ghyron seemed to have –”



“Cyraenie?” Finn interposed, thinking that if she was supposed to be the Doctor’s assistant, she ought to contribute her part to the conversation. Ashlaik glanced at her, then let his eyes linger.

“That’s Nine Three One Cyraenie,” he explained. “She’s one of his colleagues in the Astrogeology team. She got worried when he didn’t turn up for work. When she tried to find him, he wasn’t in his quarters, and she couldn’t find him anywhere. So, unofficially, we all started keeping an eye out.”

“Unofficially?” prompted the Doctor.

“Well” – Ashlaik frowned, as if the strangeness of what he was about to say had suddenly occurred to him – “I don’t think Ghyron’s been reported missing *officially*...” He shrugged. “But we all knew about it.”

“Are all of you based in one place?” Finn asked. Ashlaik’s eyes flicked over to her again, and she got the distinct impression there was now an element of interest, even admiration, in his glance. She gave him a friendly – but hopefully not *too* friendly – smile, encouraging him to answer.

“In theory, we’re all based at the Complex,” he said. “But there’re the observatories, too, and some informal sleeping quarters’ve kind of been installed over time. You know what scientists are like, sometimes. Can’t bear to leave what they’re doing to come all the way back down to the Complex just to do something as unimportant as sleeping.”

“Oh, yes,” Finn assured him, “I know *exactly* what you mean!” She couldn’t stop herself twinkling at the Doctor, who shifted uncomfortably.

“How many observatories?” he enquired.

“Well, we’ve got the two here on Felindre itself. Observatory One and Two.”

“Imaginative bit of naming, that,” the Doctor commented drily.

“One’s up there, at the top of the airbridge,” said Ashlaik, gesturing up at the elfin structure. “Two’s over on the other side of the planet. And then there’s one on each of the moons. I mean, they’re not observatories in the same sense – they’re more just small bases for conducting experiments and that sort of thing. But we call them all observatories. One to Five. It’s just – easier.” He shrugged.

“So – three moons, then?” Finn asked, casually, trying to sound as if she was seeking confirmation for something she already knew.

“Of course,” said Ashlaik, slightly surprised, as if she should have known. Inwardly wincing at her error, she smiled at him again, hoping that would distract him from asking any awkward questions.

“Right, thanks, Ashlaik,” said the Doctor. “Very helpful. But I think we need you to go on being helpful. We need to get Ghyron back to the Complex. And then find out exactly how he died.”

Finn and Ashlaik both looked at him, perturbed by the suddenly grim tone of his voice.

“How?” echoed Ashlaik, taken aback. “But – surely that’s obvious?”

The Doctor shook his head decisively, and squatted back down by the dead man.

“Is this the time-honoured question, ‘did he fall, or was he pushed?’” Finn enquired.

“Neither,” said the Doctor flatly. “Look.”

He pointed to the back of Ghyron’s head.

Finn and Ashlaik both looked more closely. Masked by the brown curls was a raised welt about three to four inches long, surrounded by some severe bruising.

“So?” Ashlaik asked. “Wouldn’t that’ve happened when he fell?”

“Couldn’t have,” said the Doctor, in a tone that brooked no argument. “Wouldn’t’ve had time to bruise like that before he died. And couldn’t be where it is on his head. Look at him. He’s fallen forward, on his face. And, trust me, he didn’t bounce! If he’d simply tipped forward, which he’d’ve had to do to land like this, there’s no way anything could have connected with the back of his head like that. Plus, look how far away he is from the bridge.”

He leapt up with sudden energy and ran over to the base of the nearest girder, then began energetically pacing back towards them, counting.

“There, you see?” he demanded, as one white dap landed right beside the body. “Twenty-five feet if it’s an inch! If he’d just jumped, he’d be back over there.” He pointed at the foot of the girder. “To be this far away, he couldn’t even just’ve been *pushed*. He’d’ve had to be positively *launched*...”

Finn and Ashlaik looked up, measured the relative distances with their eyes, and realized he was right.

“So...” Ashlaik began, slowly.

“So he was murdered,” said the Doctor flatly. “And it’s our job to find out who, and why. And stop them doing it again, should the urge come upon them.”

Ashlaik, still stunned, looked at Finn, as if hoping she’d contradict what he’d just heard. She awarded him a half-smile.

“It’s one reason why he’s called the Doctor,” she explained, with a slight shrug. “When things aren’t right, he finds out why. And then he makes them better.”

\*

Administrator Zarramin leaned back in his chair and surveyed the current population of his office with a carefully impassive face. Underneath the calm exterior, however, he was deeply perturbed. Ghyron was no longer missing. He was now installed in the mortuary in the Complex’s medical centre, being examined by Eight Nine Two Mirala, the chief medical officer. And here, in his office, four faces were staring at him, waiting for his reaction.

One of the faces was that of Nine Three One Cyraenie, Ghyron’s colleague and, he gathered, close friend. A pretty girl, but now her blue eyes were red-rimmed, and her cheeks were still damp from where she had been wiping away tears. Another belonged to the young engineer, One Four Four Ashlaik. His expression was a mixture of distress, excitement, and the occasional flash of admiration whenever his glance rested on the young woman seated beside him, whose name had been given as Finn Thornton. She, apparently, was the assistant of the fourth person in the room. The one leaning forward now to stare at him with penetrating, intent brown eyes. The one Ashlaik had introduced as “the Doctor”...

“So you’re an Interplanetary Agency Investigator, Doctor?” he queried urbanely. “But – ‘Doctor’? Surely that’s a title, not a name. Rather formal, one might think?”

“Oh, I don’t do formal,” the Doctor assured him.

Finn caught Zarramin casting a fastidious glance at the Doctor’s combination of brown suit and white daps, and could almost hear him thinking ‘*Evidently...*!’ The corner of her mouth twitched, briefly.

“What I *do* do,” the Doctor went on, “is sort problems. And you seem to have one, Administrator. A murdered man.”

“I fail to see how you can be so sure he was murdered,” Zarramin protested. “Suicide is the obvious conclusion, surely?”

“Suicides don’t bash themselves on the back of their own head before they jump,” said the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. “And he couldn’t possibly have walloped himself on that particular part of his head sufficiently hard enough to render himself unconscious and *then* jumped out from the bridge so far that he landed twenty-five feet away from it.”

Zarramin opened his mouth, then closed it again, unable to counter that argument.

“So,” said the Doctor, leaning back in his chair, “someone murdered him. And we need to find out who, and why. Particularly why.”

“Because...?” Zarramin prompted him.

“Because until we know that, we can’t know if it’s an isolated incident, or whether others of your staff are at risk for any reason,” the Doctor pointed out.

“Oh, surely not!” Zarramin protested.

“Be nice to think so, wouldn’t it?” the Doctor said. “But if you don’t know why, you can’t be certain, can you?” He cocked an eyebrow at Zarramin, who hesitated, then nodded acknowledgement.

“Where do you intend to start your investigation, Doctor?” he enquired.

“I thought Cyraenie here might be the first person to speak to,” said the Doctor, glancing across at the grieving scientist. “Since she worked with Ghyron. Then we’ll see, shall we?”

Zarramin nodded slowly. He looked at Cyraenie.

"Perhaps you should take the Doctor to the laboratory, Cyraenie," he suggested. "In the light of what's happened, I'm sure he'll be very interested in what he'll find there." There was an exaggerated significance in his tone. Finn caught it and looked enquiringly at Cyraenie, who merely nodded, and stood up; so did everyone else, except Zarramin.

"Right, then," said the Doctor. "We'll get out of your hair. On with the investigation."

"Ah, yes – the investigation," said Zarramin, looking at the Doctor keenly. "One thing, Doctor. How did you know that an investigation was needed? We hadn't reported Ghyron officially missing."

Finn looked at the Doctor, wondering how he was going to field that one.

"That's right, you hadn't," agreed the Doctor, pinning a disconcerting stare directly between Zarramin's eyes. "Everyone knew he was missing, but – no official report. Bit odd... Probably just an oversight, of course, but – made certain people wonder, that did."

Of course, the only people who'd been wondering that were himself and Finn, but Zarramin had no way of knowing that. And it was a pretty safe bet that, in the circumstances, he wouldn't be making enquiries of his superiors that might bring to light any hint of negligence.

"So I'm going to put everyone's mind at rest about that, too," he concluded, with a smile that Zarramin found even more discomfiting.

"Well – yes, of course," he said hastily. "Excellent idea. And, of course, if there's anything I or any of the staff can do to help, we'll be more than happy to do so. I'll issue a general instruction to everyone to cooperate with you fully."

"Thank you, Administrator," said Finn, when it became obvious the Doctor wasn't going to reply. Instead, he was concentrating on Cyraenie.

"Shall we start with your lab, then?" he prompted her.

"Of course," she said, in a subdued voice. "Please – this way." She led the way out of the office, the Doctor and Finn behind her.

Ashlaik was about to follow them, but Zarramin stopped him with a gesture of his hand.

"Sir?" Ashlaik asked.

"Where exactly was Ghyron found, Ashlaik?"

"By Girder 77, sir. You know – the big curve where the track comes out of the Blue Tree Valley before it starts up the mountain."

"Ah, yes – I know the place," said Zarramin thoughtfully.

"What the Doctor says makes sense, sir," Ashlaik went on. "The track dips down out of the valley before it takes the run up the slope. So if Ghyron was knocked out and taken on the train, then thrown out on that curve – well, the train's going at a good speed at that point. He'd end up further away from the bridge there than he would in a lot of other places. It would certainly account for where he was found."

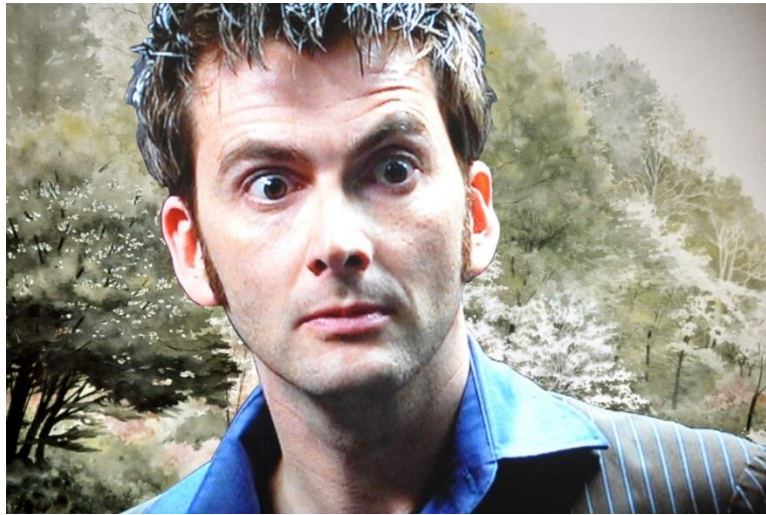
"I see," said Zarramin. He looked up at the young man and smiled. "Thank you, Ashlaik – you've been very helpful. And don't hesitate to give the Doctor any further assistance that you can."

"No, sir, I won't!" From the gleam in his eye, it was obvious to Zarramin that Ashlaik had a greater interest in being helpful to that young assistant of the Doctor's. Well, that could be all to the good.

"Right, then – on you go," he said. Ashlaik nodded, and departed.

Once he had gone, Zarramin dropped the front of polite concern he'd been maintaining, and, leaning forward to rest his chin on his clasped hands, thought deeply.

He really, really could have done without a complication of this sort.



## Chapter 6

### *The Mystery of Felindre*

Finn found herself wondering, as Cyraenie led her and the Doctor to the Astrogeology lab, how anyone got any work done in an environment like this.

Inside the Complex, all the corridors and their floors were a bright and immaculate white, and wherever the architecture permitted it, their roofs and walls were an equally spotless clear glass, allowing the sun to illuminate them almost to the point of eye-searing brightness while providing wonderful views of the surrounding forest and the vistas beyond. The inner walls, interspersed at intervals with doors to the work areas behind them, also had numerous windows incorporated in them. The scientists must have to adopt some form of professional tunnel vision as a strategy in order not to be distracted from their work – something the true scientific temperament wouldn't find hard, probably!

But if *she* had a view like that to look at during the working day, she decided, it was a fair bet her productivity rate would be seriously affected...

It was apparent that Cyraenie had a better hold on herself now. There were no more tears – for the moment, at least – and she was talking to the Doctor fairly normally, considering she'd just had her worst fears about a valued friend and colleague confirmed.

"When did you notice he was missing?" the Doctor was asking, sauntering along with his hands in his pockets. He'd dropped the air of stern authority he'd used to awe Ashlaik, and was now being his normal self.

"He's – he'd – never missed a shift, all the time we worked together," said Cyraenie, awkwardly remembering she now needed to use the past tense about her colleague. "So when he didn't turn up, I knew something must be wrong. I thought he must be going to report in sick, but I didn't hear anything from him. And it's me he would've had to tell, in Professor Laryan's absence. So I went to his quarters, but didn't get any answer. I asked among his other friends, but no-one knew where he was. I even tried to contact the Administrator, but only got as far as Helenay. She's his personal assistant. She told me not to worry, Ghyron was bound to turn up. But people were on the lookout for him, after that."

"Yes, Ashlaik explained to us how that works," agreed the Doctor. He was about to ask a further question, but Cyraenie slowed her pace and turned toward one of the corridor doors. It was labelled *Astrogeology*.

"This is us," she said, and held the door open for them to enter.

The Doctor halted a pace or two into the room, his attention immediately fastened on something in the middle of the laboratory.

"I take it that's what Zarramin was referring to when he said I'd be interested," he said, heading toward it.

The outer walls of the lab were lined with various screens and machines which Finn assumed were needed for an astrogeologist to do their job. There were a number of machines that certainly resembled seismographs –

she could see tiny needles tracing black lines on scrolling graph paper. She likewise assumed that an astrogeologist was someone who studied the geology of planets – well, presumably any other planet beyond their native one.

The centre of the lab was more given over to desks, clearly the work spaces of the individual scientists in the team. Each one had what, in the terms of her own culture, she would classify as a workstation – certainly the screens looked much like the personal computers back on Earth. Even though the Doctor had implied that they were more than a thousand years in the future from her native century, what she'd seen since arriving on Felindre led her to guess that, with certain variations, the level of technological advancement here wasn't too different from that of her own time and planet.

However, one of the work areas wasn't like the others. This one was a blackened ruin. There had clearly been a fire of some sort, which had left the desk surface charred and grey and the screen and other equipment on top of it reduced to a warped, almost unrecognizable lump of melted material.

"What happened here, then?" said the Doctor, whipping on his glasses and peering keenly at the damage.

"I don't know," Cyraenie confessed, with a helpless shrug of her shoulders. "I wasn't here. I was trying to find Ghyron. When I got back, Ansalar said she'd found it already burning."

"Ansalor?"

"A new colleague," explained Cyraenie. "Well, not new here on Felindre, but new to Astrogeology. Apparently Ghyron had asked the Administrator if he could have some extra help with the project he was working on, so Ansalar was brought in. Except that she didn't get a chance to work with him at all, in the end," she concluded sadly.

"Forgive my ignorance," said Finn, "but what sort of areas of study does your team cover? The 'geology' bit sounds fairly self-explanatory – is there anything else covered under the 'astro' bit?"

"Not really," Cyraenie smiled. "No need for volcanology on Felindre – it doesn't have any volcanoes. There is one area of investigation that's rather interesting, though." She glanced over at the seismographs. "You see, Felindre's lithosphere doesn't have a tectonic plate system. And yet..."

"And yet, you need seismographs," said the Doctor, momentarily following her glance. "Meaning there are quakes. Meaning there are sudden releases of energy into the planet's crust. And the interesting bit is..."

"That we don't know what's causing them. There doesn't seem to be an explicable mechanism for them. That's one of the things Ghyron was studying. But I don't know if it was connected with his current project or not."

"And what project *was* he working on?" the Doctor asked, still intent on the damaged workstation.

"I don't know," Cyraenie said, remembering her promise to Ghyron. Did it still hold, now he was dead? If she didn't tell this man, how could he find out what had happened to Ghyron? She bit her lip, and searched the Doctor's face. Then she decided how much she felt she could say. Had to say. "He wouldn't tell me anything about it. And he didn't want me to talk to anyone else about it. Perhaps Professor Laryan – he's the head of our section – knows something... You'll have to ask him. But I definitely got the impression Ghyron was worried. He said..." Her voice trailed off.

"What did he say?" Finn prompted gently.

Cyraenie looked at her.

"He said – if he was right – we'd all need luck," she said, a small furrow of puzzled anxiety between her eyebrows.

The Doctor looked up alertly at that, but didn't comment.

"So how many staff have you got in this section, in all?" he asked.

"Three of us. Professor Five Seven Three Laryan, Ghyron, and me. Oh, and Ansalar, of course. Four of us."

"Where's the Professor now?"

"Not here at the moment. He's been working in Observatory Four for the past few days. He'll be back tomorrow."

"On one of the moons, then?" said the Doctor. "What're they like? Similar, or different from each other?"

“They’re all quite similar,” said Cyraenie. “Slightly different in size, but all much the same age. But of course they’re so special!” Her eyes lit up with enthusiasm, and for the first time her expression of grief was in abeyance, overridden by professional fervour. Finn recognized it – she’d seen it in the Doctor often enough, and she could see the same sparkle in his eyes now, responding to Cyraenie’s.

“What do you mean by ‘special’?” she asked. “I mean, I don’t know anything about Felindre, really. I’m not a scientist, so, could you...?” She trailed off, tacitly inviting Cyraenie to expand on the subject.

The Doctor shot her a look of approval for her ploy, abandoned his examination of the workstation, returned his glasses to his pocket, and leaned back against the ruined desk, his arms folded, waiting to hear the astrogeologist’s explanation.

“Well, Felindre’s incredible enough all by itself,” Cyraenie began, and smiled slightly as she caught the Doctor’s emphatic nod of confirmation. “But what makes the system of moons so fascinating is, firstly, that they’ve got exactly the same sort of atmosphere as Felindre itself. A breathable atmosphere, with every gas in exactly the same proportions as the mother planet. Which is extremely rare, as far as we know.”

“Not entirely unknown, but certainly rare,” the Doctor agreed.

Cyraenie looked at him with interest.

“For an Investigator, you’ve got quite a knowledge of science, haven’t you?” she said.

The Doctor’s mouth opened and he hesitated, realizing he’d given himself away to some degree.

“You might say it’s a hobby of mine,” he agreed; Finn masked a smile. “But then, investigation’s something of a science, too, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so,” Cyraenie conceded.

“So the atmosphere is ‘firstly’,” the Doctor prompted. “What’s ‘secondly’?”

“Secondly, that all the moons orbit Felindre at precisely the same distance, in identical – and almost perfectly circular – orbits. Not ellipses.”

The Doctor pursed his lips and nodded, indicating that he agreed that was unusual.

“And is there a ‘thirdly’?” he asked.

“Oh, ‘thirdly’s the best of all,” Cyraenie assured him. “Because while none of the moons has any fauna, every one of them has almost exactly the same flora as Felindre itself. With one particular caveat. All and any species of plant that don’t depend on external pollinating agents, like insects or animals. And of course that’s what’s so remarkable.”

“Why?” Finn wanted to know.

“Well, how could it have got there, across tens of thousands of miles of empty space?” Cyraenie demanded. “That would be fantastic enough if it had happened on just one of them, but *all three*? And all at the same time, because each one is at the same stage of development? It’s” – words momentarily failed her – “well, it’s just one of the biggest scientific mysteries in the galaxy!”

Finn could see the Doctor’s eyes gleaming with the same passion as Cyraenie’s, but he patently forced himself to stick to his assumed role.

“And Ghyron was working on that too, was he?”

Cyraenie’s face changed visibly, but before she could reply, they were interrupted by someone else entering the lab.

The newcomer halted as she realized there were strangers present. She was very tall, almost as tall as the Doctor, and very athletic looking – if anything, she was even bigger than him. She was probably a few years older than Cyraenie, with dark hair that was cut into a short bob, and hazel eyes that were momentarily wide and startled.

“I’m sorry!” she blurted in confusion, her eyes going to Cyraenie. “I didn’t realize you had visitors.”

“This is the Doctor, and this is Finn,” said Cyraenie, introducing them. “They’ve come to investigate what happened to Ghyron.”

Finn was sure that if she’d noticed that sudden nervous flick of the woman’s eyes from one to the other of them, the Doctor would have, too.

“Doctor, this is Ansalar,” Cyraenie went on.

“Ah! Then it was you who found Ghyron’s computer on fire,” said the Doctor. There was another nervous little flick of Ansalar’s eyes, this time towards the ruined workstation.

“Yes,” she confirmed, taking a slow pace or two into the lab, leaving the door ajar behind her. “I can’t imagine how it could have happened. I didn’t think those things were capable of catching fire! It’s very strange.”

“And it meant we lost all Ghyron’s data,” said Cyraenie, sadly.

The Doctor frowned.

“Don’t you have a backup system?” he demanded.

“Well, yes, but” – Ansalar looked uncertain – “somehow it hadn’t worked. Something must’ve interfered with the datastream. Whatever he was working on – whatever it was I was supposed to help him with – all gone.” She shrugged helplessly.

The Doctor was now wearing a quite formidable look.

“So Ghyron’s working on something that he implies is pretty serious, then he disappears, ends up dead, and by a strange twist of fate” – his tone was a masterpiece of disbelieving sarcasm – “all his work gets irretrievably destroyed at the same time? One coincidence too many, don’t you think?”

The two women looked startled, as if they hadn’t made that connection until now.

“I hadn’t thought...” began Cyraenie, slowly.

“Well, I *am* thinking,” said the Doctor shortly. “And –” He broke off as someone else came in.

It was Ashlaik. He’d discarded the coverall he’d had on earlier, and was now wearing a smart pullover-style top with ordinary trousers. He hesitated, apparently detecting the sudden strain in the atmosphere inside the lab, then ventured a smile.

“If I’m not interrupting...?” he began, carefully.

“Not a bit of it! Come on in! Join in the fun! More the merrier!” said the Doctor, making a florid gesture of invitation with one arm that came close to clipping Finn on the ear; she automatically moved her head quickly out of the way, and couldn’t refrain from awarding him a slight frown that, of course, he entirely failed to see.

“Well, the Administrator thought you might like a tour of the Complex,” said Ashlaik. “In case it helped with your investigation. So he suggested I be your guide. If you’d like...?” he concluded diffidently.

“Yeah, why not?” agreed the Doctor. “I think we’re finished here for the time being.” He swung back toward Cyraenie. “Might have some more questions later, all right?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Anything that’ll help to find out what happened to Ghyron, Doctor.”

“Right! Great! So, Ashlaik – we’re all yours,” said the Doctor.

“Er – fine,” Ashlaik said, his eyes on Finn. “This way, then...?”

Ansalar watched as the young man ushered their two visitors out of the lab, then turned to Cyraenie.

“Do you think he’s right?” she asked, incredulously. “Do you think there’s really something strange going on?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Cyraenie miserably. Then she sat up and straightened her shoulders, and looked at Ansalar with steady, if over-luminous, eyes. “But I’ll tell you something. If there *is*, that man’ll find it out. I just *feel* it; I *know* it. And then I’ll know what *really* happened to Ghyron.”

Ansalar nodded thoughtfully. Then she looked round the lab. “Is there anything you want me to do here now?”

“Not really,” said Cyraenie. “But tomorrow the Professor’ll be back. He’ll sort something out. Take the rest of the day off, Anse. There’s nothing to do here, at the moment.”

“Okay – thanks,” said Ansalar, heading for the door. Halfway through it, she paused and looked back.

“Will you be all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” Cyraenie said, quietly.

Ansalar looked at her searchingly for a moment longer, then nodded, and went out.

Alone in the lab, Cyraenie looked forlornly at Ghyron’s destroyed workstation, and her shoulders slumped again.

"I hope I'm right about you, Doctor," she said to the empty room, in a tremulous whisper.

## **Chapter 7**

### ***The Impact of Investigation***

"...And this is the accommodation block," said Ashlaik, gesturing around the spotless reception hall.

"Are those the names of all the staff, then?" asked the Doctor, nodding at a huge screen mounted on the wall. It seemed to be a diagram of the room layout of the whole block, with names displayed alongside each suite.

"Yes. If you want to know if someone's in or out, you just enter their name into the search screen here, and it tells you. Look – I'll show you," said Ashlaik, taking them over to the search unit. "Cyraenie's still in the lab, right? So if I put in here 'Nine Three One Cyraenie'..." He tapped the keys and hit the search button. "Look," he said again, gesturing upwards.

On the wall screen, Cyraenie's name flashed blue for a few seconds, then returned to the normal black on white.

"So she's not in. But Six Eight Four Forayan – he's another engineer, like me – he's finished his workshift, so he'll be in his quarters. Zedding loud enough to shake the building apart, probably, knowing him!" Ashlaik tapped the new entry in, and waved at the screen. "See?"

And above them, Forayan's name flashed briefly in green.

"What if you're in but you don't want to be disturbed?" Finn asked.

"Then your name flashes in red. And the doors are all biometrically operated, so, unless you're the occupier, you can't get in unless you're invited."

"No override?" asked the Doctor, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, yes, of course, for emergencies, but –"

"Good, because I'll want to see inside Ghyron's quarters at some point," said the Doctor firmly.

"Oh..." Ashlaik was momentarily disconcerted. "Then I'd better introduce you to Perrili. She's our Portress. She and the Administrator are the only ones who can override the biometrics. Just over here..."

But Perrili, it seemed, wasn't in her office at that moment.

"Wait here," said Ashlaik. "I'll see if I can find her. Won't be long!"

Whereupon he vanished into one of the corridors leading out of the reception hall.

"Useful system," observed the Doctor, wandering back out into the hall and looking up at the wall screen again. "Wonder what it says for Ghyron at the moment?"

Idly, he tapped Ghyron's name into the search.

"Doctor!" Finn's response was immediate, and urgent. The Doctor quickly looked at her, then up at the screen, where she was looking.

Ghyron's name was flashing in red.

"Now, is that a glitch in the system, a failure to update the software, or" – the Doctor paused significantly – "is there someone in Ghyron's room at the moment who doesn't want to be disturbed?" He put his head on one side as he regarded Finn, inviting comment. "Shall we go and see?"

"Would there be any point in my saying 'no'?" Finn asked, one eyebrow cocked.

They grinned at each other.

"Come on, then! Before whoever it is decides to vacate the premises," said the Doctor, and hared off down the corridor leading to Ghyron's room, Finn in loyal pursuit.

"Here it is!" the Doctor yelled, skidding to a halt by one of the doors, tearing the sonic screwdriver out of its pocket. There was a brief buzz as he aimed it at the biometric panel, then the door popped open, and he darted inside. By that time, Finn had caught up with him, and was hot on his heels.



But, as a brief exploration of the rooms proved, they were too late. Finn was captivated by the display of carved figures of Felindrean wildlife covering virtually every surface. But that was all that was of interest. If there had been someone else there, they were already gone.

\*

Elsewhere, in one of the other staff quarters, a communicator was being activated.

“Yes?” came the response in an almost inaudible hiss.

“It’s me.” The speaker used a low voice, barely above a whisper, as if afraid someone could overhear.

“Well? Is there a problem?”

“It’s that Doctor. He’s making connections. He’s latched on to the fact that the data was destroyed as well. He thinks there’s a link with Ghyron’s death.”

“How do you know that?”

“I heard him say so. He doesn’t believe it’s a coincidence.”

“Then he’s a danger. Like Ghyron. And you know what to do about dangerous people, don’t you?” The communicator at the other end was shut off abruptly.

The speaker stared at it, responding as if the other person was still listening.

“Yes, I know what to do...”

\*

A few minutes later, Ashlaik reappeared in the reception hall.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I can’t find Perrili anywhere. No idea where she’s gone!”

The Doctor and Finn were standing apparently mesmerized in front of the wall screen, as if they hadn’t moved from the spot since he left them. They dropped their eyes from the display and turned to look at him.

“Ah, well, never mind,” said the Doctor consolingly. “It’ll keep.”

“Hope you weren’t too bored while I was gone,” Ashlaik said, with an apologetic smile at Finn.

“Absolutely not,” the Doctor assured him. “Very useful little interlude, actually.”

Ashlaik looked at him as if not too sure what to make of that.

“Anyway – onwards and upwards!” said the Doctor encouragingly. “What about the rest of the tour, then?”

\*

One certainly couldn’t accuse Ashlaik of not having been thorough, Finn thought, shifting surreptitiously from one foot to the other, trying to find the one that was the least sore to put her weight on. A tactic that wasn’t having much success, since both of them felt worn down to the anklebone due to following him along what felt like every single corridor in the Complex. She wondered briefly if the Doctor ever got sore feet, with all the ground he covered. Probably not, drat the man...

“So that just leaves the outside grounds,” Ashlaik was saying. “If you’d like a look at them?”

The Doctor had caught Finn’s covert attempts to find a comfortable stance and accurately deduced their cause.

“Actually, Ashlaik, what I could really do with at the moment is a nice, cold drink,” he declared. “Let’s go back to the catering hall. Have a sit-down and a think.”

Finn threw him a grateful look.

“Of course!” Ashlaik said, anxious to please. Anxious to please Finn, that was; it was very obvious to the Doctor that Ashlaik was rather taken with her. Which he found both amusing, and slightly worrying, because it might mean it would be difficult to slip away and have a proper look at some of the areas they’d toured. Unless

he and Finn split up; if Ashlaik was forced to the choice of escorting one or the other, the Doctor knew where he was putting *his* money – or would, if he ever bothered with the stuff...

A few minutes later they were seated at a window table in the catering hall, sipping at glasses of something Ashlaik called jarolla juice: cream in colour, thick in texture, sweet in flavour, and very cool and refreshing.

“Mmm! I could get used to that,” said the Doctor, putting his glass down. “But now, I need to go for a walk.”

“A *walk*?” Finn couldn’t help exclaiming. He couldn’t need *more* exercise – not after the miles they’d already covered!

“Need some thinking time,” he said. He caught Finn’s dismayed look, and fought down a grin. “No need for you two to come. You stay here. Have another jarolla juice or two. And when I’ve had my think, I’ll come back and let you know what conclusions I’ve come to. That’s all right with you, isn’t it, Ashlaik?”

Ashlaik had half-risen at his mention of going for a walk, but now he sank back into his chair.

“Of course it is, Doctor. I’ll have another go at finding Perrili, about arranging rooms for you in the accommodation block. If we’re gone when you get back, that’s probably where you’ll need to look. Take a look at the wall screen – that’ll tell you which visitor suite you’ll be in. Your name’ll be up there with everyone else’s. But we’ll need to get your palm print added to the database, of course.”

“Quite sure you don’t want me to come with you, Doctor?” Finn queried.

“Nah,” said the Doctor. “You can be doing your own thinking while I’m away. About what we’ve seen. Compare notes later.”

Finn caught Ashlaik’s gaze fixed on her – and his enthusiastic expression – and looked at the Doctor as much as to say, *Thanks – I think...!* But she didn’t say anything. The Doctor had to fight his grin down all over again as he left.

But the grin swiftly dissolved as he strode unerringly back through the corridors that would take him to the Astrogeology lab. For something Ansalar had claimed was hard to burn, Ghyron’s computer had been pretty thoroughly destroyed. It would definitely be worth seeing if he could determine whether some sort of flammable agent had been used to cause such a devastating conflagration. If he could, it might give a lead on who the saboteur was.

When he slipped in through the door, it was immediately evident the lab had been closed down for the day. There was no-one there, and a slatted blind had been lowered over the window that looked out into the corridor.

Which suited the Doctor just fine; that meant no-one was likely to interrupt his examination of the workstation.

A quick burst of sonic screwdriver, and he was in. He closed the door behind him, and headed for the burned-out wreck. Glancing around, he saw a desk lamp on the undamaged workstation next to it, and lifted it across to the desk he was interested in, angling the light onto the charred computer.

This put his back to the door as he conducted his examination, which he was intent upon until suddenly he had the impression that there had been a brief change in the ambient light of the lab. As if someone in the corridor had cast a shadow on the slats of the blind, or as if the door had swung quickly open and then closed again – which of course it couldn’t have done; he’d closed it himself...

He straightened up and looked around, but couldn’t see that anything had changed. The partial gloom of the lab was still and silent, beyond the almost subliminal hissing noise of the rows of seismograph needles on their rolls of paper. With a shrug, he turned his attention back to the workstation.

A few seconds later, something made such hard and sudden contact with the back of his head that consciousness left him without him ever having the opportunity to realize it had gone.



## Chapter 8

### *Corridors*

Finn looked up from the table to see Ashlaik coming back toward her.

“Sorry about that – I just had to pop off and see to something,” he apologized. “Hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long.”

Finn wondered if ‘seeing to something’ was his euphemism for a perfectly normal human function, but simply smiled.

“Of course not,” she assured him.

“Right then. So, would you like to see the grounds?”

Hoping her feet had benefited sufficiently from the respite, Finn nodded.

“You mentioned ‘designated areas’ earlier,” she commented, as he ushered her out of the catering hall and out onto the network of paths outside the Complex. “And places where you aren’t supposed to go. How does that work? Why is there a restriction?”

“Well, bear in mind I’m not a scientist,” he said cautiously. “So I can’t tell you the specialist stuff. But I gather the reasoning goes along the lines of: we’re aliens in this ecosystem. So our just being here might be affecting things. You know, the Schrödinger’s Cat ‘are we affecting the outcome simply by observing’ thing? Can’t say I really ever got my head around that, but some people get a bit worked up about it still. Anyway, what the powers that be decided was that we’d minimize our ‘effect’ by staying within specified areas, not just roaming anywhere on the planet we felt like.”

“Is that what the airbridge is for, then? And why’s it called the ‘airbridge’?” Finn asked.

Ashlaik shrugged.

“This is a CBOB,” he said. “So we couldn’t make any physical changes we didn’t have to. Observatory One had to be as high up as we could get it. Couldn’t chip a landing pad out of the mountain top. Couldn’t cut down the forest to build a roadway, either. A train track up on a bridge through the air, over the top of the forest – that was the only other practical way to get up there. We had to build the Complex where there was flat rock, of course. Well, flattish, anyway... And build it so it just sits on top of the rock as much as possible. Just the minimum of excavation for foundations, that sort of thing. Same for all the other buildings on Felindre. But it meant the Complex had to be this far away from Observatory One.”

“So – a bridge through the air, above the forest. An airbridge,” said Finn, nodding.

“Yes,” Ashlaik agreed. “Obviously, we couldn’t avoid having to be there in the first place to build it, but we wore protective suits and all that while we were doing it. We still have to, when we’re doing bridge maintenance. Hence that natty piece of tailoring I was wearing when we met.” He grinned at her briefly. “And now we’re only allowed within specified areas around the observatories and the Complex.”

“Don’t you find that constricting? With such a beautiful planet all around you?” Finn glanced around at the multihued foliage surrounding them as they strolled along the path.

He shrugged.

“Not really. I mean, the areas where we can go are pretty extensive. Around here, that is – not so much the observatories. And not when we remember why the restrictions are there in the first place. After all, it is so beautiful. I’ve never come across anyone who works here that takes this planet for granted. We all feel the same. It’d be criminal to risk damaging it or interfering with it in some way, don’t you think? Just for some sort of temporary self-gratification?”

She was impressed with his attitude, and was about to commend him, when something distracted her.

A strange feeling, sweeping through her head, confusing her senses. As if she had suddenly been transported to another place. Instead of seeing Ashlaik, she was looking down a swirling blue corridor of immeasurable length, with somebody who she couldn’t see, standing at the other end of the corridor, calling to her. She couldn’t make out the words, but the desperation in the voice was clear.

She halted abruptly, shut her eyes and put a hand to her head. Then she swayed slightly, as if she were about to fall. Ashlaik saw it, and swiftly put a supporting arm around her shoulders.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with quick concern.

Finn didn’t answer for a moment or two. The sensation was receding as suddenly as it had come, but it left her feeling disoriented and bewildered.

She opened her eyes and saw him gazing at her solicitously while she tried to collect her spinning thoughts. Oh, well, it had probably made his day that he’d managed to get an arm round her. She smiled slightly, and he smiled back, evidently interpreting it as a sign she was recovering.

“Sorry,” she said. “Don’t know what happened there. Got a bit dizzy all of a sudden.”

“Perhaps you’re over tired,” he suggested. “Maybe I’d better take you back to the accommodation block and sort out a visitor suite for you?” He used the opportunity to give her shoulders a squeeze.

“Thanks,” she said. “Perhaps that would be a good idea.” She straightened herself, and reluctantly he dropped his encircling arm.

“This way, then,” he said, gesturing back toward the Complex. “Feeling better now?”

“I’m sure I will in a minute,” she said, rather distractedly; she was still trying to analyze the odd sensations in her head, but they were receding fast.

“Good. Good... By the way, I – er – that is – do I take it you and the Doctor’ll want a suite each?” he probed delicately.

Finn didn’t want to discourage his rather flattering interest too brutally – he was much too nice a person for that – but on the other hand, it would be the kind thing to make it plain he shouldn’t get his hopes up.

“Oh, no, we’ll share one,” she said matter-of-factly. Ashlaik’s face fell.

“So, you’re...?” He let his voice trail off, but she could accurately extrapolate the rest of the sentence.

“Oh, no, no, no,” she said quickly, and smiled within at the way his face changed again. He was positively transparent, was Ashlaik. Someone else who should never play poker with the Doctor! “But if there’s a suite with separate bedrooms as well as a main room, that’d be just the thing. The Doctor likes an audience to think aloud to when he’s working things out. So he’ll want me handy for what you might call professional conferences, things like that. You know, so I can listen and nod in the right places. Tell him when he’s being brilliant. That sort of thing.” She smiled at him, inviting him to enjoy the imagery.

“Ah, right,” said Ashlaik, looking slightly happier. “And he’s often brilliant, then, is he? The Doctor?”

“Oh, yes. Consistently brilliant! I’m always learning from him,” Finn assured him. “Tell you something, Ashlaik – no matter how many people you’ve got in the room, he’ll always be the cleverest one. So I’m a very lucky girl. Privileged. Wouldn’t swap this assignment for anything! Or anyone!” She flashed him another smile.

“Oh,” said Ashlaik. “Right.”

When the Doctor came to, he found he was lying sprawled face down on a hard surface. With no idea where he was, because it was pitch black. Without attempting yet to get up, he rolled onto his back and fished the sonic screwdriver out of his breast pocket. He switched on its light and held it up above him like a torch; he lay there for a few moments, gazing up at the blue glow as if he had nothing more pressing to do. Then he decided it was time to stand up and find out where he was.

Which proved a more painful experience than he'd anticipated, as his abused cranium let him know in no uncertain terms how much it was still hurting.

"Ow! That's *sore*! Did you have to hit me *quite* that hard, whoever you are?" the Doctor indignantly demanded aloud of his now absent assailant, rubbing the back of his head gingerly.

After a few moments he felt recovered enough to explore his surroundings. Which didn't take long, because they consisted only of a very small compartment of some kind, probably a storage area, but at present quite empty except for himself. He wondered for what purpose *he'd* been stored; nothing very encouraging, he felt sure.

He reached forward and tried the door handle. The door was locked, of course.

Equally of course, a few seconds later it wasn't.

The Doctor found himself in a long, empty corridor, its clean white walls illuminated by some fairly subdued lighting, its ceiling covered by long lines of pipes. It had the unmistakable look of a basement level, the sort of place you'd find the water purification plant, the power generator, the air conditioning system, and similar, equally gripping, facilities. He was obviously somewhere under the Complex.

"One part of the tour you missed out on, Ashlaik," he muttered, tucking the sonic screwdriver back into his pocket. He looked up and down the featureless corridor, trying to decide the most promising direction in which to go.

A few minutes and a couple of flights of stairs later, he found himself emerging into one of the ground level corridors of the Complex. Outside, twilight was falling. He'd obviously been out of things for a couple of hours or more. Finn would probably be worrying about him by now; she'd be relieved at his reappearance.

On the other hand, he wondered who, when they saw him, was going to be actively surprised.

\*

"He's been gone an awfully long time," said Finn anxiously. She'd just established that the Doctor wasn't in their visitor suite, and was, as he'd suspected, beginning to worry.

"He doesn't strike me as much of a clock-watcher," said Ashlaik, glancing in through the open door of the apartment as if hoping he'd get an invitation in. "Maybe he's found something out, and lost track of the time while he's investigating. I'm sure he'll be back to tell you all about it before too much longer."

"I hope you're right," said Finn.

A number of people were traversing the corridor past them; it must have been the end of a workshift, and there was a whole raft of staff returning to their quarters. Ashlaik suddenly hailed one of them.

"Hey, Ansalar!" he said, waving.

The tall woman started slightly, and looked over at them as if surprised to be accosted. She seemed a very nervy type, Finn thought; always looking jumpy. Still, she supposed that being good at your job didn't necessarily confer confidence in other areas of your life. She wondered if Ansalar had always been that way, or whether something had happened to make her like that.

"Hello," said Ansalar, coming over to them. "You've had the tour, then?" She smiled shyly at Finn.

"Yes, thanks – very informative, and extremely thorough!" Finn said, for Ashlaik's benefit.

"Look, Anse, you haven't seen the Doctor anywhere, have you?" Ashlaik asked his colleague. "We parted company quite a while ago and we haven't seen him since."

Ansalar shook her head, looking blank.

"Hello," said another voice. "What's up? You all look very worried about something."

They all looked round, to see Cyraenie approaching them.

"Is something wrong?" she enquired with an upward tilt of her eyebrows, inviting an explanation.

"Probably not," said Finn. "It's just that we seem to have mislaid the Doctor."

"Oh," said Cyraenie, slightly surprised. "How long ago?"

"About a couple of hours or so," said Ashlaik. "Nobody seems to have laid eyes on him since."

"Strange," said Cyraenie. "I'd have put him down as a rather noticeable person, on the whole." She met Finn's eyes as she said this, and unexpectedly found they were sharing a moment of spontaneous amusement.

"Oh, I am," agreed a familiar voice. "Very. Get noticed everywhere, me."

"Doctor!" Finn was aware that her face had lit up at the sight of the tall, brown-suited figure strolling towards them. She was also aware that Ashlaik had caught her expression, and would have felt a bit sorry for him if she hadn't been so glad to see the Doctor.

"Hello," he said cheerfully, but she noticed he was looking very carefully at the faces of the other three. "Miss me?"

"Well, we were rather wondering where you'd got to," said Ashlaik, trying to dissemble his rather crestfallen expression. Ansalar was wearing a mystified look, while Cyraenie's face was distinctly quizzical.

"Oh, you know – here and there, round and about, coming and going, investigating and discovering, that sort of thing," said the Doctor. "Making some very interesting discoveries, actually. So, speaking in my capacity as an Investigator, I think perhaps my assistant and I should confer for a bit. Don't you, Finn? And we'll see you all again tomorrow, yes?" As he spoke, he'd made his way through the group and broken it up, herding Finn into the open doorway and swinging round to smile at the other three as they stepped back. "Sleep well, everyone!"

"Wait a minute, Doctor!" Ashlaik protested. "You'll need to see Perrili first. Get your palm print added to the database. So you can open the door next time. Only Finn can operate it at the moment."

"Oh, that's all right," the Doctor assured him. "Do it first thing in the morning. Promise! But now we've got stuff to talk about. Night night!"

And before any of them had the chance to say another word, he'd bundled Finn inside and shut the door behind them.

## **Chapter 9**

### ***Catching Up***

They found themselves in what was obviously the main living room of the apartment.

"Interesting discoveries?" Finn prompted, as the Doctor began poking his nose casually through the doorways of the other rooms, all of which seemed to open from the one they were now in.

"Ooh, yes," the Doctor said, abandoning his exploration and throwing himself full-length on his back onto one of the two rather luxurious sofas which were among the furnishings. He put his hands behind his head and subjected the ceiling to a raking examination. "For instance, they've got a lovely basement level. Incredibly clean. Ultra clean! They could show one or two hospitals I know a thing or two about cleanliness. I mean, if you bother to keep your basement that clean, speaks volumes about the rest of the place, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure it does," said Finn levelly. "But it rather begs the question, what were you doing in the basement?"

The Doctor took one of his hands from behind his head and rubbed the back of it, reflectively.

"Coming round, and escaping from the store cupboard somebody locked me in after they clouted me," he said.

Finn looked at him, startled.

"Really?" she blurted.

"Really," the Doctor assured her. "Come and feel the bump on my head, if you don't believe me. Still very sore, you know! I really don't think they needed to hit me quite so hard." He sounded aggrieved. "Bit overkill, I thought. Might tip them the wink about that, when I find out who they are. And why they did it. Although

that's probably fairly obvious, come to think about it. I was being too inquisitive about how Ghyron's computer got destroyed. That's what I was looking at when they decided me and consciousness weren't to be on speaking terms for a bit. Probably stuffed me in the cupboard to keep me safe until after dark. Safe's the wrong word, actually. Let's go for 'secure' instead. Yeah, secure. Until they could get rid of me properly."

Finn regarded him unhappily.

"Ah, but —! Not easy to get rid of, am I?" the Doctor reassured her. "Still here, see?" He pulled his sonic screwdriver out and wagged it at her cheerily before tucking it back in his breast pocket.

"So how long ago did all this happen?" Finn asked.

The Doctor's face fell into more serious lines, and he swung himself up and round to sit leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped.

"About ten minutes after I left you," he said. "So it'd be interesting to know where everyone was about then, wouldn't it? Because so far, only a few people know about us being here. Zarramin, his personal assistant, Ashlaik, Cyraenie and Ansalar. I wonder where they all were? Well, apart from Ashlaik, of course. We know where he was."

"Actually, we don't," said Finn slowly, and slightly reluctantly. "Not entirely, that is. Not very long after you left, he suddenly said there was something he needed to do. Vanished for about ten minutes or so. Then came back, all 'as you were'..." The corners of her mouth turned down. "Which I guess puts him in the frame along with everyone else."

"Does, rather," agreed the Doctor thoughtfully. He tipped his clasped hands up to rest his chin on them, and stared at Finn without really seeing her. "Plenty of time for him to pop in, pop *me*, and then pop me downstairs. So, no further forward on that one."

"Something else, Doctor," said Finn. "While he was walking me round outside. Something happened."

"Try it on, did he?" the Doctor suggested, with a grin.

Finn looked at him, slightly irritated.

"No, nothing like that – his manners're too good. No, this was something else."

"What, then?" asked the Doctor, looking at her carefully, having registered her estimation of its importance.

"I had this – well, sort of dizzy spell. All of a sudden I couldn't see anything except what was inside my head."

"And what was that?"

"A long corridor, all swirling shades of blue. Looked as if it went on forever. But there was someone at the far end, calling to me. And they were frightened. They were calling for help. Then, just like that – back to the real world. Felt a bit dizzy, at first. Then I was all right again." She frowned slightly. "The thing is, it felt a bit like what happened during that tremor. You know, the one we felt just before we found Ghyron. I can't describe it, but – it felt – *familiar*, somehow. As if it was all part of the same thing."

"Maybe it is," said the Doctor. "We've just got to work out how. And who. Who killed Ghyron, and walloped me. And what's going on with this whole planet."

"Enough to keep us occupied for the next five minutes, then," said Finn, with a faint smile.

"Ooh, at least," said the Doctor, treating her to one of his widest grins.

\*

Finn slept soundly that night – so soundly that for a moment, when she first awoke, she couldn't immediately remember where she was. Then recollection occurred. She lay still for a few moments, a smile, of which she was not conscious, curving her mouth. She was on another world, in another time – with the Doctor! Again. Did one ever get blasé about that, she wondered? It didn't feel possible, to her. She felt a magical little thrill, every time she remembered what she was doing, and who she was doing it with.

Speaking of whom, where was he? She got out of bed, dressed quickly, and splashed some water on her face to complete the waking process. Then she went out into the living area.

A swift examination of the apartment established that the Doctor wasn't there. And, characteristically, hadn't left any sort of message. One corner of her mouth quirked in a rueful half-smile. Even if he hadn't been sleeping, maybe he was eating – that was something he did do, from time to time! She certainly needed to, at the moment. She decided to go to the catering hall and pick up some breakfast, hoping that the Doctor would deduce where she'd be.

A hope that was borne out when he suddenly deposited himself in the chair opposite.

"Ah, there you are," she said calmly. "What've you been doing, while I was recharging my 'sleep' and 'eat' batteries?"

"Taking the opportunity for another look at the Astrogeology lab," he announced cheerfully. "While there was no-one else there, in the long dark watches of the night," he intoned sepulchrally, helping himself to some of the food on her plate. She forebore to comment on that behaviour, but raised her eyebrows interrogatively.

"And did you learn anything new?"

"Yes, I did," he said, chewing thoughtfully at something that looked – and tasted – similar to a chunk of soda bread with a sticky, savoury spread of some kind on it; it had a flavour that was unfamiliar to Finn, but it was pleasant enough to her taste buds. Or would have been, had it been *her* taste buds that were experiencing it... "Something rather interesting. What do you know about astrogeology?"

"You've been with me on every occasion when the subject's been discussed since we got here. Feel free to think of that as the extent of my knowledge," Finn invited him.

"Right! Well, I got into one of their computers and had a poke round, and one of the interesting things about what they do under that subject heading here is to look not just at the physical geology of this planet and its moons; they look at the overall spatial environment in which they exist."

"Meaning what? They look at space as well? I mean, the space in which the system is? And the space that surrounds it?"

"Absolutely," agreed the Doctor, looking pleased that she was catching on so quickly. "And the thing that they look at it with round here is a system of small space telescopes and other sensors mounted on a network of satellites. They call it the Panoptes Array. Which should feed all the data it picks up back down to here."

"Should – but doesn't?" said Finn, picking up her cue. "Or, at least, isn't at the moment? For some no doubt very mysterious reason?"

"No doubt! And when d'you suppose it stopped working?" The Doctor looked at her with wide, innocent eyes.

"Please, please – don't tell me – let me guess," said Finn drily. "Just after Ghyron disappeared, by any strange chance?"

"Pretty well within minutes – almost seconds, in fact," the Doctor confirmed with a generous element of hyperbole, helping himself to another of her chunks of bread and inelegantly sucking a stray smear of spread off the tip of his index finger. "And guess what? No indication of when the repairs might be completed. Or even put in hand, as far as I could see. Cyraenie's been putting in some rather irritable memos on the subject, but nobody seems to be able to give her a clear reason as to why the system's not already back online."

"So who's responsible for that?"

"Hard to say – except that it seems all such requests have to be channelled through the Administrator's office for financial monitoring and authorisation," said the Doctor, employing his innocent look again.

Finn looked at him sharply, ignoring his swift acquisition of her last remaining bread portion.

"You think –?"

"I think it's almost certainly *not* a problem with the accounts," said the Doctor, cutting across her, his words muffled by dint of his mouth being suddenly full. "Anyway, let's go and find Cyraenie. She'll probably be in the lab by now." He swallowed the final mouthful. "Finished your breakfast?"

"No," said Finn deliberately. "*You* finished my breakfast, in case you hadn't noticed!"

The Doctor grinned, and leapt out of his chair.

"What's keeping you, then?" he demanded. "Allons-y!"



## Chapter 10

### *The Credibility of Coincidence*

When they entered the Astrogeology lab they found Ansalar and Cyraenie in conversation with a man they didn't know. On seeing them Cyraenie broke off the conversation, her face lighting up.

"Doctor! Finn! The Professor's back!" she announced happily.

"Professor One Five Three Laryan," said the man, stepping forward and holding out his hand.

As he and the Doctor greeted each other, Finn decided he had one of the most attractive voices she'd ever heard; a beautifully modulated tenor. He looked to be in his middle fifties, with the merest hint of grey in his brunet hair; his long, clean shaven face was dominated by a pair of keen, dark eyes, and he had an understated, pleasant manner, calm and dry, that she soon realized was the front for an incisive and formidable intellect.

He turned to her with a charming smile, and shook her hand, too.

"Doctor – Finn Thornton – it's a pleasure to meet you both," he said. "Cyraenie's been telling me all about you. I'm very glad you're here to resolve this terrible situation. What can I do to help?" Not a word wasted; clear and to the point. Finn glanced at the Doctor and could tell he'd taken to Professor Laryan immediately, just as she had.

"Any idea what Ghyron was working on?" asked the Doctor, promptly.

"Only in the most general terms," replied Laryan. He leaned back against the desk behind him and folded his arms. "I'm afraid I can't give you any detail at all. What I do know is that it concerned the effects of their spatial environment on the geology of planets generally – and, of course, on Felindre and its moons specifically. I'm also fairly sure, though he didn't say so directly, that he was exploring the possibility of a tie-up to the quakes. But I'm afraid I have no idea what his findings were. Cyraenie tells me he'd put a preliminary report in to the Administrator's office. I tried to get hold of it, but it seems it's somehow been mislaid."

The Doctor looked sceptical.

"Has it, now," he muttered. Laryan cocked an eyebrow at him, and Finn had a strong feeling that he was absolutely in tune with the Doctor on this one.

"Yes... Which is unfortunate, of course, because with everything that's happened, it appears to be the only copy in existence," he observed drily. "And having listened to Cyraenie, it seems to me that everything that could have happened, has, indeed, happened. Ghyron unexpectedly dies. His report is lost, and his computer is unaccountably destroyed; moreover, the backup system mysteriously fails to perform. And the Panoptes Array also inexplicably malfunctions. All within the space of a few days. It's a truism that the word 'coincidence' exists because the condition does, but the statistical likelihood of all these events occurring virtually concurrently seems to me to be beyond all reasonable limits of probability or credibility."

His face suddenly creased into what could only be described as a grin – a very attractive one, with surprisingly impish overtones, despite the implications of his verdict.

"In other words – something's up!" His eyes twinkled to match his unexpected descent into colloquialism.

The Doctor grinned back.

"Professor, you're a man after my own heart!" he declared. "Great minds, and all that."

Cyraenie, like Ansalar, was looking incredulous.

"Professor!" she exclaimed. "D'you mean –? Surely you don't –! Do you *really* think there's some sort of" – she groped for an appropriate word – "some sort of *plot* going on?"

"Applying logic to the data appears to make it the only tenable conclusion," Laryan agreed calmly.

"But – but *why*? What on earth could Ghyron have discovered that would... And *who*? Who'd want to do all those things?"

"Someone who *does* know what Ghyron discovered," said the Doctor. "And has some sort of vested interest in no-one else finding out what it was. Which is, of course, exactly what we need to do. Before whoever it is decides they need to take further action..."

In the uncomfortable pause that followed this observation, there was a quiet knock on the door and it opened to admit Ashlaik.

"Oh, hello, Professor Laryan!" he said cheerfully. "Nice to see you back. Sorry to interrupt, but I thought I just ought to check whether the Doctor and Finn needed me to do anything..." He trailed off, and looked at them all more carefully, suddenly picking up on the atmosphere.

"You know, I'll have to stop coming to this lab," he said slowly. "Every time I do, everyone here looks as if something weird's just happened. Hope it's not me!"

"Of course not, Ash!" said Ansalar quickly. "It's just that – well, the Professor's been agreeing with the Doctor that there's something strange going on. They think there's some sort of" – she hesitated over the melodramatic word – "plot going on. That someone's behind it all."

"*Really*, Professor?" asked Ashlaik, astonished.

"Inescapable conclusion, I'm afraid," agreed Laryan.

Ashlaik looked lost for words.

"Oh. Well... *Is* there anything I can do for you, Doctor?" he said, seizing on one of the few things about the situation that still seemed to bear some relation to normality.

"Not at the moment, thanks, Ashlaik," said the Doctor. "But if I think of anything, I'll let you know."

"Right. Okay. I'll – uh – I'll get on, then," said Ashlaik, still sounding a bit stunned. He gave them an unconvincing smile, and went out again.

"Right! And so will we!" said the Doctor, suddenly springing energetically to his feet and throwing a swift look at Finn. "Let's go and visit the Administrator again. See if we can't chase up that report somehow."

"Best of luck," said Laryan drily. The Doctor grinned at him again.

As soon as the door had swung to behind the Doctor and Finn, Ansalar said diffidently, "Professor, sorry to be so mundane – with all this going on, I mean – but one of the seismographs is acting up a bit. The one covering Segment North Green Four. Should I get one of the techs in to look it over?"

"Mmm, better had," agreed Laryan. "Don't want to miss anything exciting on that front, do we? Thanks," he added, as she got up to leave. She gave him one of her nervous little smiles, and left the laboratory.

"I'll just pop out for a moment, too, if you don't mind, Professor," said Cyraenie. "I've got a bit of a headache, and I've left my analgesics in my room." She looked at him sadly. "There's been so much going on in the last few days – I feel as if I'm foundering a bit, sometimes. And Ghyron's gone..."

He saw the pain in her eyes, and nodded.

"Of course," he said comfortably. "Off you trot. But be back as quick as you can, won't you? We've got a lot of catching up to do."

"I will," she promised, and followed Ansalar out.

Professor Laryan relaxed back against the desk he was leaning on, and looked quizzically around the suddenly empty laboratory.

"Dear me," he murmured, a humorous twinkle in his eye despite the fact there was now no-one there to see it. "Was it something I said...?"

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Once again, the communicator was being activated.

"What do you want?" demanded the voice at the other end, harshly.

"He's getting closer! And Laryan agrees with him. They both think it's all deliberate."

"Then we must do something to muddy the waters. Play for time... Where's the Doctor now?"

"On his way to the Admin Office – he's looking for Ghyron's report."

"Is he...?" The other voice paused to consider, then spoke decisively. "Then this is what you're going to do – listen carefully..."

Four Five Nine Helenay was not someone Finn felt she could really take to, though she couldn't really put her finger on the reason. Helenay was obviously a very efficient personal assistant, thorough and meticulous, and extremely dedicated; there was just something on what Finn chose to call the 'human' level that seemed lacking, and because of it, she wasn't easy to warm to.

However, Finn was inclined to think that her – well, *anger* didn't seem too strong a word – her anger over the disappearance of Ghyron's report was genuine. There was a convincing mix of indignation, embarrassment and outraged pride evident in her manner over the idea that something for which she was responsible in her professional capacity could in any way have been mislaid.

The Doctor, it seemed, thought so too, from the way he caught Finn's eye and gave a slight nod over Helenay's expostulations.

"I really don't understand it," she was complaining. "In all my years as a personal assistant, I've *never* had a document go missing! I *know* it was locked into that cabinet" – she pointed at a very solid-looking metal four-drawer cabinet – "and only I and the Administrator have keys to it – both of which are accounted for! And I *know* it was filed there, because I did it myself! *And* the cabinet was still locked, when I went to retrieve it for Professor Laryan! But it wasn't there!" she concluded, indignantly, as if she'd been offered a profound personal insult.

"Really?" said the Doctor, and something in his tone made Finn prick up her ears. Something Helenay had just said had caught his attention. "There's no way someone could have filched either of the keys, used it, and returned it, without your knowing?"

"Certainly not!" denied Helenay.

"Hmmm," murmured the Doctor, pursing his lips while he considered. Then he broke out into a wide smile.

"Ah, well, never mind," he said cheerfully. "I'm sure it'll turn up sometime. Whatever's happened to it, I'm absolutely certain it's not your fault."

She looked slightly mollified, and was about to reply, when Zarramin came into the office. Instantly she was once again the epitome of brisk efficiency.

"Good morning, Administrator," she greeted him.

"Good morning, Helenay," he returned. "Good morning, Doctor, Miss Thornton. How are your investigations going?"

"Oh, you know – making progress," said the Doctor with uncharacteristic – but, Finn felt sure, deliberate – vagueness. "We were just trying to find out what's become of Seven Two Two Ghyron's last report. The one he submitted here just before he disappeared."

"Professor Laryan's back, and he wants to see it," Helenay added by way of further explanation.

"Well, I gave it to you," said Zarramin, as if that settled its location beyond all doubt.

"And Helenay stored it away securely," agreed the Doctor. "Except that it's somehow vanished out of a still-locked cabinet. To which, I understand, only you and she have keys." He paused, his eyes fixed on Zarramin's. "So it looks as if someone must have managed to steal one of the keys and make away with the report, without your knowing about it," he went on airily, after a couple of seconds.

Almost imperceptibly, Zarramin's body language relaxed, as if some kind of crisis had been averted.

"Can we find out who?" he asked.

"Oh, we'll find out who's responsible, Administrator – don't worry about that," said the Doctor, in a tone as serious as if he was making a vow.

For a split second Zarramin's face was totally immobile. Then he smiled.

"I welcome the reassurance, Doctor," he said. "You'll keep me updated on any new developments, I trust? Oh – you *have* been given communicator units, I presume?"

"No, we haven't, actually," said the Doctor. Helenay immediately looked horrified.

"Doctor, I'm *so* sorry! What a thoughtless oversight!" she apologized. "Here – please take these."

She dived into one of her desk drawers and placed two objects on the desktop. They were small circular palm-sized devices that had an inner circle of fine wire mesh with a plain metal surround in which various buttons were inset.

“If you press that one there” – Helenay demonstrated – “that gives you a direct line to me here in this office at all times.” She quickly ran through the rest of the controls, explaining how they could contact each other, or use the devices to access the database of all staff contacts.

“Good! Great! Thank you,” said the Doctor, flipping his communicator into the air and catching it again deftly before shoving it into his pocket, and tossing Finn hers. “Right! We’ll be on our way, then.”

He and Finn had just reached the door when Zarramin suddenly spoke.

“Oh, Doctor... Wait a moment. I’ve had a thought.”

The Doctor turned and met his eyes.

“I’ve just remembered something,” Zarramin went on. “A couple of weeks ago Ghyron went up to Observatory One for a few hours. It may mean nothing, of course – totally unrelated to what’s happened – but it occurs to me that it might just be worth your taking the trip up there to look around. Who knows? Perhaps he left some sort of clue there. You might spot something that would be meaningless to the rest of us. What do you think?”

The Doctor considered.

“Well, we don’t want to leave any possible stone unturned,” he agreed. “Yes. Thanks. How do we go about getting there?”

“It’ll mean a trip on the airbridge,” said Zarramin. “If memory serves, I believe there’s a shuttle train leaving in about half an hour or so. Isn’t that right, Helenay?”

“Quite right, Administrator,” she confirmed promptly. “In twenty-seven minutes. I’ll make sure the Doctor and Miss Thornton are on it.”

“Thank you, Helenay,” said Zarramin. “Efficient as always.”

A remark that brought a small, tight smile of appreciation momentarily to her lips.

“Thank you, Administrator,” she said, primly.

## **Chapter 11**

### ***Runaway Train***

It took about twenty-five minutes to traverse the airbridge up to Observatory One, but, as the Doctor pointed out, it *was* uphill most of the way. The train travelled at a fairly relaxed pace, allowing them, as the only passengers on this particular trip, some spectacular views of the multi-hued tree canopy on the way. Apart from the moment when the Doctor pointed downwards, and she realized he was indicating the spot where they’d discovered Ghyron’s body, Finn thought she’d never enjoyed a train trip so much – well, one that wasn’t pulled by a steam engine, anyhow, which for her always added that extra special element of ‘magic’ to rail travel whenever it could be experienced.

Their exploration of the Observatory itself, however, was far less successful. Despite the apparent willingness of the staff there to help them in any way they could, no-one was able to tell them anything useful, and Ghyron didn’t seem to have left anything, any record, of his work there.

“Oh, well, Zarramin was right – worth a try,” said the Doctor, as he sauntered back to the shuttle train, Finn alongside him. “But a big fat zero in terms of a result.”

The train driver, standing beside his cab door, saw them coming, and waved to them.

“Looks like you’ll be the only two passengers on the way back, as well, then,” he observed cheerfully. “Seems to be my day for it!”

“Sorry – your day for what?” Finn enquired politely.

“Runs with hardly anyone on board,” said the driver, a bearded, rather portly man of medium height and an apparently permanent smile. “Had to run a special up here earlier, and that only had one person on it. So you’ve doubled my passenger load at one fell swoop, you have!” He winked cheerfully.

“A hundred per cent improvement, then!” she said with a twinkle in her eye, and he chuckled.

“Right, well, you’d better get yourselves one hundred per cent on board, or you’ll be bringing me back to zero!” he riposted. “*And* make me late! We don’t leave in one minute, on the dot, you’ll have me out of a job, you know!” He winked again.

“I *like* that man,” observed the Doctor with approval as he climbed into the last of the three small carriages that constituted the entire train.

“He’s definitely got a sound grasp of percentages,” Finn said with a straight face, as she followed him.

“Someone else you shouldn’t play poker with, then,” the Doctor advised, crossing the carriage to peer out of the window on the other side.

“There’re probably quite a lot of people on *that* list,” was Finn’s rejoinder, *sotto voce*.

There was a short pause. Then the Doctor looked toward the front of the carriage, as if he was trying to see through the metalwork to the driver’s cab.

“I thought he said we were leaving in one minute,” he observed, with a small frown.

“He did,” Finn confirmed.

“Well, we haven’t. Wonder why not?”

“Does it matter?”

“Probably not. He just struck me as the punctual sort –”

They were both taken by surprise as the train suddenly jerked, making them stumble. Then it began to move. As they had been expecting. But, somehow, it was obvious something was wrong.

The Doctor sprang to the other window, Finn close behind him. They were just in time to see a figure stretched out at the side of the track. With another figure, face hidden by a hood, running away. Both were almost instantly out of their sight as the train began to pick up speed.

“Doctor – on the ground – that was the driver!” Finn exclaimed, alarmed.

“Yes, it was!” the Doctor agreed vehemently. He peered out of the window, trying to catch a view of the cab at the front of the train. The door of it was open – as should not have been the case. And as the train went round a fairly tight curve of the track, he could see enough of the interior to make it clear that there was no-one in the cab.

No-one was driving the train.

“Runaway train!” he yelled, taking to his heels and heading for the door through to the next carriage; Finn followed him. He seized the handle, but the door refused to open. He promptly whipped his sonic screwdriver out, but for once it had no effect.

“Deadlocked!” he exclaimed angrily. He raced back past Finn to the door by which they’d boarded, but it was the same. He growled with frustration.

He glanced back at Finn; she was staring at him with wide, alarmed eyes.

The train was picking up even more speed; Finn could feel its motion becoming gradually more unsteady. The descent down to the terminal wasn’t that steep, but steep enough. If nothing stopped them, they’d be guest-starring in a pretty spectacular crash before long.

Unless the Doctor could do something. Which he was obviously planning, because he’d gone to the nearest window and was looking at it carefully. Then he looked around, saw a small metal cylinder affixed to the wall next to the door, and wrested it from its clamps.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, putting out a hand to grab the headrest of the nearest seat to steady herself as the train began to sway even more violently.

“Think I fancy a ride on the top deck,” he said, and sent the cylinder crashing through the window in a shower of shattered glass. He briefly turned a gleaming smile on Finn. “Lots of lovely fresh air! Does you the world of good!”

Finn stilled her instinctive protest; if he didn't do what he was evidently intending to do, they'd both end up dead anyway. But she somehow felt impelled to say something. So she contented herself with the comment, "Mind you don't cut yourself on the way out!" Superfluous, and probably a bit stupid, but somehow it made her feel better to say it.

The Doctor was already kicking at the remaining shards of glass to clear them away. He suddenly twisted like an eel, and the next moment he was outside, his feet resting on the sill of the window, his hands, now out of sight, evidently clinging onto some handhold above. He crouched just long enough to flash her a reassuring smile. Then he pulled himself up, his daps dangling at the end of his long legs for a fraction of a second before he was entirely gone from view.

Finn ran to the window and looked up, but already there was nothing of him to be seen.

Somewhere up there, perched perilously on the roof of a train hurtling down the mountainside out of control, already shaking violently because of its own speed, the Doctor was inching his way forward to get to the driverless cab. To try to save both their lives, in the little time there was left.

And there was nothing she could do.

Except...

She realized there *was* something she could – and should – be doing. She thrust her hand deep into her pocket and pulled out the communicator unit she'd been given earlier, stabbing at the button that would put her straight through to Helenay.

"Four Five Nine Helenay," came the familiar prim tones.

"Helenay!" Finn gasped urgently. "We've got an emergency! Listen...!"

\*

The train was picking up more speed as the inexorable pull of gravity drew it ever faster down the mountainside.

Clamped to the roof like a limpet, the Doctor squinted against the increasing air pressure that was trying to force his eyes to close. Already the carriages under him were travelling with such speed that he dared not risk trying to walk along the roofs – the violence of the swaying movement when the train traversed curves in the track could easily see him sharing Ghyron's mortuary slab, or else starting his next regeneration. Something he was in no hurry to do...

So, instead, he was trying to pull himself along the top of the roof, with a style of motion not unlike that of a caterpillar, forced on him by the design of the train; there seemed to be something like solar photovoltaic panels lining the roof, which presumably powered it, but they were completely smooth, so the only places he could get a grip were on the edges of each panel, and the real problem was that they were about two feet longer than he was, even with his arms and legs extended at full stretch. So he had to crouch on the edge of one panel and launch himself forward with a sort of diving motion to make sure his fingers gripped the far edge of the next, draw his feet up under him, and re-launch for the next one.

Which, although an ungainly way to make progress, was working reasonably well. The most dangerous manoeuvres were having to launch himself across the gaps between the carriages, but, all things considered, progress was good.

Up to the point where the train swooped down toward the curve below which they'd found Ghyron's body.

The Doctor, who had understandably not been taking time to appreciate the route or the scenery, realized too late that the already violently swaying surface beneath him was suddenly leaning wildly to the right. His fingers slid sideways along the edge of the panel, as his body weight added its own momentum to the motion of the train, trying to throw him away from it.

Desperately, he let go with his left hand and grabbed for a handhold further up toward the middle of the roof. The metal edges were cutting painfully into his fingers, but he ignored them – better that pain than the alternative on offer. But he couldn't stop himself swivelling sideways.

From the waist downwards his body parted company with the carriage roof, his feet hanging over the edge and flailing around, trying to find a foothold, while he clung frantically to the edge, his fingers once again sliding with increasing speed.

He wasn't going to be able to hold on...

## **Chapter 12**

### ***Taking a Cab***

Then the train swung violently over to the left, the momentum enabling him to swing his body fully back onto the roof.

He lay there panting for a few moments, regrouping. His watering eyes, fighting to see against the wind created by the train's speed, made out that for the next mile or so the airbridge's route was fairly straight.

Then, still ignoring the pain of his lacerated fingers, he resumed his progress. He was running out of time.

After what seemed like an age, he was on the roof above the cab. Cautiously, his hair being flattened against his skull by the pressure of the wind, he leaned over the side. Yes, he'd judged it perfectly. He was right above the open cab doorway.

Now all he had to do was swing himself down off the roof and into the cab. At what felt like a hundred miles an hour. With virtually nothing to give him the necessary purchase. And with the train running out of airbridge in an ever-decreasing number of miles. While making sure he'd correctly calculated the drag that would be created by the wind resistance, or he'd be 'blown' backwards and miss the doorway entirely.

Simple!

So he did it.

With the smooth motion of a professional acrobat, his tall, slim body curved through the air and into the cab.

He landed in an untidy heap, painfully impacting with the driver's seat as he slid across the floor, but took only a split second to leap to his feet and start scanning the settings of the controls. The readings were not good news – whoever had sabotaged them had done a fairly comprehensive job.

He threw a wild glance through the windscreen. The depot at the end of the airbridge was already in sight, in the far distance...

He looked at the controls again, and dived into his pocket for the sonic screwdriver. If he could bypass the routing of the braking system, by rewriting the connection *here*, and diverting the power from *there*...!

"Come on, come *on*!" he exhorted himself aloud. If he didn't do this in the next few seconds, it wasn't just going to be himself and Finn who died – it would be everyone in the depot and its immediate environs. At this speed, the crash would be utterly spectacular – and comprehensively deadly.

He didn't even have time to reward himself with a triumphant grin as his furious efforts suddenly paid off. A green light on the control panel flashed; almost before his optic nerve had registered that, he was already stamping on the manual brake backup pedal on the floor of the cab.

It wasn't having any effect! Was it...?

Yes! Yes, it was!

But would it be enough? Would the accumulated momentum of the train be slowed in time? The depot was speeding toward him...! The braking system was squealing like a pig in agony – a whole herd of pigs in agony, come to that...

The Doctor shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, pointlessly seizing the control wheel in front of him in a white-knuckled grip.

But the brakes were, finally, despite their ear-splitting protests, working. The train was slowing.

Unfortunately not quite soon enough to prevent it hitting the buffers, demolishing them as its own momentum carried it forward, off the end of the track, to plough onwards, with increasing sluggishness, toward the far wall of the depot.

Until at last, with a contact as delicate as the touch of a drifting snowflake, the nose of the cab came to rest against that wall.

The Doctor slowly unclosed his eyelids and stared with wide, wild eyes at the metal surface mere inches away, still gripping the control wheel with chalk-pale knuckles, while his hearts slowed to a more normal rate. Cautiously, he let out a long breath, and swallowed. Then he remembered the deadlocks, and pressed the control that would release them – and Finn.

He then took a few moments to look again at the way the controls had been sabotaged, and nodded to himself. Someone had definitely done this deliberately.

Someone who, apparently, wanted both him and Finn dead...

A movement in his peripheral vision made him look down, out of the still open cab door. Someone was standing there, on the newly formed heap of earth, rock and broken platform pushed up into a sort of bow wave by the weight of the train.

Finn. Looking up at him, her face pale, but, in spite of it, with a lively twinkle in her eyes.

Putting on the whine of a bored child, she demanded, “Are we there yet?”

Which got her a huge, face-splitting grin by way of reply. The Doctor leaped out of the cab and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“You all right?” he demanded.

“I feel drunk,” Finn told him.

The Doctor looked puzzled in the extreme.

“Drunk?” he repeated, incredulously.

“Yeah – like a glass of water.” Finn summoned up a smile. “You know – like Ford Prefect said to Arthur Dent.”

“Ah, yes,” said the Doctor, his face clearing. “Ford Prefect! Prodigious party animal! *He’d* met the French, let me tell you! A man of great practical wisdom. And many well-used towels.” He looked Finn over again. “So you really are all right?”

“For the purposes of this conversation, let’s say that I am, shall we?” she suggested.

The Doctor smiled. Then he became aware of something else, and he looked around.

“Hang on,” he said. “Where is everyone? The place is empty!”

Finn put a hand in her pocket, pulled out her communicator unit, and waggled it at him.

“Helenay really is efficient,” she remarked.

The Doctor beamed at her.

“Oh, brilliant! You’re brilliant, you are! Well done! So you got everyone cleared out of the way.”

“Bet they’re all making a beeline for us now, though,” Finn remarked.

Which was confirmed the very next instant, as a number of people suddenly erupted through a doorway into the depot and teemed towards them. The Doctor saw Laryan and Ashlaik amongst all the others; the former contenting himself with a quirk of one eyebrow as their eyes met, the latter, his face very nearly as ash-coloured as his name implied, making straight for Finn.

“Are you all right?” he demanded anxiously.

“We both are, thanks,” she said, moved by his evident concern. Ashlaik flicked a glance at the Doctor.

“Sorry – I did mean to include you in that, Doctor,” he apologized lamely.

The Doctor waved it away with a casual gesture. His eyes were roaming over the people grouping around them; some of them must be depot staff, some of them probably security, and possibly one or two medical staff. However, now they were parting to make way for the Planetary Administrator as he, too, came to investigate events.

“Doctor! You’re unharmed, I trust?” he exclaimed in tones of great solicitude.



“Yes, thanks,” agreed the Doctor cheerfully. “Didn’t get to appreciate much of the scenery at that speed, but at least we survived.”

“Thanks be for that!” said Zarramin fervently. “What can I say to you but to apologize deeply for such a horrendous experience? I’ll put an investigation team into action immediately! Such a malfunction – such a terrible accident! – must never be allowed to happen again.”

“I suppose you could call it a malfunction,” said the Doctor. “But it certainly wasn’t an accidental one,” he added flatly. His eyes briefly met Laryan’s, which momentarily widened before he nodded at the Doctor, slowly.

“What do you mean?” Zarramin responded, with an element of bluster. “Surely you don’t think that –”

“Oh, yes, I do,” the Doctor contradicted him. He looked over the group around them, everyone transfixed and silenced by the implications of his words. He looked back at Zarramin. “But then, your investigation team’ll tell you that, I’m sure.”

“I can hardly believe this,” Zarramin protested. “I –”

Laryan’s dry, calm tones cut across him.

“Forgive me, Administrator, but I think this might fruitfully be taken up again a bit later on. For now, I’m sure both the Doctor and Miss Thornton would like some time to recover from their dreadful experience. Isn’t that so, Miss Thornton?” He looked at her, feeding her the cue.

“I must admit, I wouldn’t mind sitting down for a moment or two,” she admitted, in a small voice. “And a hot drink, perhaps?”

Zarramin collected himself together.

“Of course!” he agreed. “What am I thinking of? Laryan, will you see that...?” He trailed off.

“With pleasure, Administrator,” said Laryan calmly, above the rising murmur of startled conversation now spreading among the rest of the group. “Please, follow me, Doctor. Ashlaik, perhaps you’d escort Miss Thornton?”

“Of course, Professor,” said Ashlaik.

As they made their way out of the depot, the remainder of the group now spreading out to survey the damage, Laryan murmured almost inaudibly, “*Another* statistical likelihood beyond all reasonable limits of probability or credibility?”

“Oh, yes!” the Doctor agreed.

He glanced over his shoulder. The only person not staring at the wrecked train was Zarramin. Instead, he was watching the four of them as they walked away, his face inscrutable.

The Doctor looked forward again, and nodded to himself, once.

## **Chapter 13**

### ***Correlations and Quakes***

Claiming the need for rest, the Doctor had finally convinced Ashlaik to leave their suite, escorted by Laryan, who had indicated with the merest hint of raised eyebrow that he’d see them later.

“Phew!” Finn puffed, plumping down on the sofa. “Didn’t I tell you once I’d never wanted to go on any scary fairground rides? More convinced than ever, now!”

“Very revealing, though,” said the Doctor thoughtfully.

“How d’you mean?”

“I’m thinking about who was at the depot, and who wasn’t.”

Finn stared at him, momentarily puzzled. Then her face cleared.

“Oh! You mean – it definitely wasn’t Ashlaik! Because he couldn’t’ve got down ahead of us – so he couldn’t possibly have been the person up at the Observatory!”

“Yes – but then, I knew that already,” said the Doctor, rather absently.

Now Finn was really perplexed.

“How?” she demanded.

“Because whoever sabotaged the train was a woman,” announced the Doctor.

“How do you know? All I saw was someone in a hood.”

“The running action,” said the Doctor. “Men and women are built differently; they run differently. Woman, definitely.”

“So that narrows the field of suspects down to about half the personnel, then,” Finn observed drily.

“It’s progress!” said the Doctor, slightly indignantly. “Of a sort... And of the people we know, the people who’ve been most closely involved in what’s been going on, Ashlaik, Laryan and Zarramin were all at the depot. Whereas...” He looked at her significantly.

“Whereas,” she finished slowly, “Helenay, Cyraenie and Ansalar weren’t... Do you seriously think it was one of *them*?”

“Or more than one of them,” pointed out the Doctor. “Doesn’t let anyone out of the frame – not even the men. Any two of the six could be in cahoots. And, of course, there might be someone else we don’t even know about yet!” He suddenly grinned at her, revelling in the conundrum.

“Oh, you’re *such* a comfort to me,” Finn told him, which got her another grin.

“Well,” she announced, getting to her feet, “I’m going to –”

She broke off abruptly; her eyes closed, and her hands went to her temples. She swayed slightly. Alarmed, the Doctor leaped forward and put his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“It’s happening again,” she said. “That feeling... The blue corridor...”

The Doctor closed his own eyes. Yes – now he was getting it, too. In his head, the desperate voice calling from the other end of the swirling blue corridor, but only very faintly. He moved his hands up to brush Finn’s away from her temples, replacing her fingers with his own. Realizing what he was doing, she didn’t resist.

They stayed locked together for another minute or so. Then the sensation began to fade, until it was gone again. The Doctor dropped his hands, and they looked at each other.

“Interesting,” he remarked. “For some reason, you’re getting the signal, whatever it is, a lot stronger than I am.”

“But why would that be? I only got my telepathy second-hand, from you. Why would I have better reception than you?” Despite herself, she broke into a grin. “Hark at me! Makes me sound like a television aerial.”

“Must be because you’ve got a closer connection with whatever, or whoever, is doing it,” said the Doctor. “Come on – let’s get to the Astrogeology lab.”

“Why, all of a sudden?”

“Remember how you’re not going to play poker with me? How are you with betting?”

“Don’t know – I never do it,” Finn retorted.

“Aw! Pity. Because I was going to bet you that there’s just been another earthquake somewhere. Come on! Let’s go see!”

\*

“Yes,” said Professor Laryan, his eyes flickering momentarily over to the bank of seismographs. “Yes, there’s just been another one. In Segment South Amber Nine. How did you know?” He looked at the Doctor with interest.

“Sorry, Professor, but – what do you mean by a ‘segment’?” Finn asked.

“Oh, it’s how we categorize the planet by area,” said Laryan. He hit a button on his computer and a 3D holographic representation of Felindre appeared in the air above his desk.

But not as it would appear if, for instance, you were approaching it from space, with its continents and seas and atmosphere. This was a stylized sphere, with a central line around its equator, and thin lines of what Finn

presumed were the equivalent of latitude and longitude on Earth; however, the lines were more distantly spaced on this globe, and each segment, reaching from pole to pole, was a different colour.

Laryan pointed to a spot on the southern half of the sphere, in a section of the amber-coloured segment he'd referred to.

"Here," he said. "This is South Amber Nine."

"And where are we in relation to that?" the Doctor asked, squinting through the glasses he'd jammed onto his nose as soon as the holograph had been displayed. Laryan indicated a point on the other side of the planet, in the northern half, in an ivory-coloured segment.

"North Cream Three," he said. "This is us."

"Just about as far away from here as it's possible to be," muttered the Doctor. "So how did we feel it?"

Laryan regarded him with interest.

"A question I wouldn't mind having answered, myself," he admitted. "How *did* you know there'd been another earthquake?"

"Finn told me," said the Doctor, rather mischievously, leaning against the nearest desk with folded arms, and grinning at Finn's sudden consternation as the Professor turned his enquiring gaze on her. She briefly arched her eyebrows at him, as if asking him whether she should explain, and, seeing his brief nod, relaxed a little.

"This is going to sound really odd, Professor," she said, hesitantly. "But I promise you it's true."

"Finn, it would never occur to me to doubt anything you told me," Laryan assured her. "You strike me as a sensible and on the whole quite logical person, whom I would regard as a credible witness under any circumstances. So, please – do your best to astonish me." He treated her to one of his charming smiles.

Finn blushed, but there was no doubting that what he had expressed as a compliment of the highest water was, to Laryan, neither more nor less than a statement of an obvious truth. So she swallowed, trying to regain her composure, then began.

"Well, since we got here – well, no," she amended, "not quite since then, but after – something that happened; I'll tell you about that in a moment – when a quake's happening, I get a sort of feeling. In my head. And I see something. In my head."

She hesitated, but Laryan gave her an encouraging nod.

"Go on," he said. "What is it that you see, and feel?"

Finn was about to answer him, when they were interrupted by someone entering the lab.

It was Cyraenie.

Her face lit up when she saw them.

"Doctor! Finn! I heard about what happened. Are you all right?"

Finn stared at her, thinking about the Doctor's earlier statement, but in spite of that, it seemed to her that Cyraenie's delight and concern were both quite genuine. She looked at the Doctor, and found him looking back at her with an expression that indicated to her he thought the same.

"Hello, Cyraenie," he said cheerfully. "Yes, fine, all present and correct. Bit shaken and stirred, but no harm done. Where were you, that you missed all the excitement?"

"Oh, we've got some sensors out on the perimeter of the permitted area here," said Cyraenie. "The Professor sent me out to check them earlier, after you left. I only got back a few minutes ago. But everyone's talking about what happened! Are you *sure* you're all right? I'd've been scared half to death!"

"I was nearly scared all the way," Finn assured her. "If the Doctor hadn't climbed over the carriage roofs and got into the cab, we wouldn't be having this conversation now!"

Cyraenie shuddered, then looked at the Doctor with something close to awe, as the implications of Finn's brief description sank in.

"Did you really do that?"

“Oh, people-saving I do for free,” the Doctor disclaimed. “My planet-saving rates are seriously punitive, though. Talking of which – you were about to explain to the Professor how you know when there’s an earthquake going on.”

Cyraenie turned startled eyes on Finn. Finn, in turn, was looking at the Doctor, and so was Laryan – and he was evidently thinking the same as her. Why had the Doctor mentioned planet-saving, and what bearing did what she was saying have on that?

“Finn here seems to have some way of sensing when an earthquake is happening – anywhere on the planet,” Laryan said to Cyraenie, as calmly as if it was a commonplace occurrence. “She’s just about to describe what it feels like.”

Finn coughed nervously, and tried to pick up the interrupted thread of her thoughts.

“It’s not a very nice sensation,” she said. “I start to feel dizzy, and then it’s like I can’t see what’s around me, even if my eyes are open. It’s as if my brain has to concentrate so much on what’s happening inside it, it has to divert the part of it that usually interprets what I see –”

“The visual cortex. In the occipital lobe,” the Doctor interrupted, succinctly.

“Right... Well, what I see is a sort of corridor, stretching out into the distance. And I can’t see them, but at the other end there’s somebody calling out. I don’t know if they’re calling to me, or it’s just that I can hear them. But they’re afraid, whoever they are. And desperate. And then it fades away, and everything goes back to normal.”

“And it lasts – hang on,” said the Doctor, interrupting himself as he suddenly bounded over the seismographs and studied the one that recorded the most recent one. Then he returned to his original place. “Yes,” he went on, “it lasts almost exactly as long as the quake is in progress. From the time Finn told me it was happening again until it stopped, I reckoned two minutes and thirteen seconds. According to your seismograph sheet over there – two minutes and twelve seconds.”

There was a brief silence. Finn looked at Cyraenie and Laryan, expecting them to pour scorn on her claim. But while Cyraenie seemed stunned by what she’d heard, she clearly had no intention of arguing against it. And Laryan merely looked thoughtful, as if he was a computer correlating all the data, and arriving at conclusions based on it.

“I see,” he said at last – slowly, but not because he was doubting her word; simply taking on board what she was saying. “And what was this additional factor you mentioned earlier? You implied it had some bearing on your ability to sense these events.”

“Ah,” said the Doctor, significantly. “That would be when we came across a rather remarkable creature emerging from its chrysalis.”

Cyraenie’s mouth dropped open, and even Laryan looked startled.

“*Chrysalis*?” he exclaimed. “A Nithlon? Are you telling me you’ve seen a *Nithlon*?”

“If it’s about four to five feet long with transparent wings edged with mauve and green, yes,” agreed the Doctor. “Why? Something unusual about that?”

Cyraenie and Laryan just looked at each other, momentarily wordless. Finn had a strong suspicion it took a lot to disconcert Laryan; learning the reason promised to be interesting.

Laryan recovered himself, and reached for his communicator.

“I think, before you go any further, there’s someone else who’d want to be in on this conversation,” he said. “If you don’t mind?”



## Chapter 14

### *Scientists and Their Theories*

Professor of Biology Eight Nine Two Ehrath was tall and spare, with straight fair hair long enough to touch his collar. He also had a rather engaging air of slight absent-mindedness. Finn reminded herself that clichés only came into being because they were based on realities, and Professor Ehrath was a classic of his kind.

At the moment his absent-mindedness was itself absent – completely – replaced by a mounting professional excitement over her and the Doctor’s encounter with the newly hatched Nithlon. Nithlons, it appeared, were only rarely seen, and no-one had ever – ever! – had a close encounter with one.

It seemed that, quite unknowingly, she and the Doctor had had an experience for which most of the scientists on Felindre – and certainly the biologists – would happily have signed away their souls. Hence Laryan’s earlier episode of amazement, and the Professor’s current excitement.

Such excitement, fortunately, that he never thought to ask what they had been doing roaming in a restricted area. Finn found herself glancing at Laryan, who was observing the scene in that unobtrusive way he had, and made a small bet with herself that the circumstance was something that hadn’t escaped *his* notice, even if he’d chosen for some so far unexplained reason not to remark upon it.

He caught her eyes upon him and his own twinkled in response, almost as if he could read her mind. She smiled briefly, and turned her attention back to Ehrath.

“This is – well, it’s incredible! Wonderful!” he was enthusing. “Only a few people have ever even *seen* a Nithlon, let alone been present at a hatching. And it just spread its wings and flew off?”

“Well, not quite,” the Doctor amended. “We had a quick conversation with it first.”

Ehrath looked at him, his face suddenly blank.

“Conversation?” he queried, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “What do you mean? Nithlons don’t *speak*. And they’re not intelligent. They’re just – well, enormous insects. There’s no such thing as an intelligent insect.”

“Oh, isn’t there?” the Doctor began sarcastically, about to rise to the challenge, but Finn deemed it an apt moment to interrupt him, to keep the subject on track.

“If this one was anything to go by, actually, Professor, Nithlons are immensely intelligent,” she said. “Right from birth – if that’s the right term – she could talk intelligibly. Unlike us! We have to learn our language and how to use it; she came into the world ready equipped with both comprehension and vocabulary.” She smiled. “It was a pretty remarkable experience, I can tell you.”

“Look, I’m sorry, young lady, but this is just not possible,” said Ehrath firmly. “We know very little about Nithlons –”

“Evidently,” muttered the Doctor, *sotto voce*, but loud enough for Ehrath to hear him and cast him a momentarily irritated glance.

“– but one thing we do know is that they don’t have vocal cords or any means of producing audible speech,” the biologist finished stubbornly.

“Didn’t say they did,” grumped the Doctor, irritated by the scientist’s attitude. Ehrath flashed him a perplexed look.

“Then how could you possibly have a conversation, as you claim?” he challenged.

“Because she telepathed,” Finn said, simply.

Ehrath’s face was a picture of disbelief and disdain.

“Telepathy? What rubbish! In my opinion, and that of many other reputable scientists, telepathy is completely unproven scientifically. And you’re claiming to *be* telepaths, are you?” snorted Ehrath, scornfully. “Telepathic people talking with a telepathic insect? I don’t think so! Telepathy, indeed!”

The Doctor’s eyes blazed, but now even Finn’s ire was raised, and she shot to her feet, fixing the Professor with an uncharacteristically steely eye.

“Forgive me, Professor, because I’m not an academic like you, but I’d just like to analyze the content of what you’ve just said,” she said grimly. “And tell me if I’m wrong, but when the semantic content is distilled, am I correct in saying you’ve just called me a liar?”

Cyraenie’s eyes were round with astonishment and consternation; Laryan’s were calm and amused. The Doctor had forgotten his annoyance in amusement at Finn’s reaction; he wondered how much of the phrasing was hers, and how much had been influenced by his mind in hers. Whatever the answer, it had certainly brought Ehrath up short. His face was a combination of shock and discomfort, not just at her words, but, the Doctor suspected, at himself, his own attitude.

“Well, not exactly – that is – well, I meant – that is, I *didn’t* mean –”

Finn let him flounder for a moment before interrupting.

“Do I not strike you as a fairly normal person? Functional? Not aberrant? A reasonable level of intelligence and comprehension?” she demanded.

“Well, yes, of course, but –”

“And were you there, at the event in question? Personally present to witness it? Do you have any experience of interacting with a Nithlon, either subjective or objective?” Finn continued to press her attack.

“Well – er – no...” Ehrath now sounded thoroughly deflated.

“Then will you kindly have the courtesy to explain on exactly what basis you’re doubting my word?” Finn demanded. “I’d always understood that an open mind was a prerequisite for a scientist, but clearly I was wrong about that. What was it somebody said once? Something about scientists being more attached to their theories than they are to their wives and children? I’m beginning to believe it!”

She caught the Doctor’s eye, and they shared a brief smile: he knew she was quoting Robert Heinlein, to whom he had introduced her. He played briefly with the idea of one day literally introducing her, but then decided he had more important things to concentrate on at the moment.

Ehrath stuttered for a moment or two, then his shoulders sagged. He looked at Laryan, as if for support.

“She’s a reliable witness, Ehrath,” said Laryan, shaking his head solemnly, and fighting to keep the twinkle in his eyes at a tolerable level. “If that’s what she says, I’d take it as the truth, if I were you.”

Ehrath looked floored.

“Well – if you say so,” he managed weakly, at last. He was silent for a few moments, obviously thinking deeply. Then he took a deep breath, pulled himself erect, and looked at Finn.

“Miss Thornton, I’m so terribly sorry, and you’re so terribly right,” he said. “I ought not to dismiss anything simply because it’s outside of my personal experience or professional compass. I apologize, humbly.”

Finn’s irritation, like the Doctor’s, had quickly transmogrified into a gentler emotion; in her case, a mixture of sympathy and empathy. After all, she’d had to deal with a similar fundamental revision of her views and beliefs, once, and she knew it hadn’t been a comfortable experience. Perhaps she should have been a bit more tolerant of someone else undergoing the same process.

"That's quite all right, Professor," she told him, sounding slightly apologetic herself. "The incredible's always a bit confounding at first, isn't it? Believe me, I *know*!"

He smiled at her gratefully, but with a degree of uncertainty; he was still obviously engaged in rearranging long-held beliefs.

"So, now that peaceful diplomatic relations have been restored," said Laryan drily, "there's one of the implications of this that I believe the Doctor wants us to discuss further, now that the element of Finn's, and the Doctor's, telepathic sensitivity has been accepted by everyone, at least as a working hypothesis. Isn't that so, Doctor?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" agreed the Doctor. "The reason I mentioned the Nithlon in the first place is that the contact between it – her – and Finn was much stronger than it was with me. And I think that's made Finn more sensitive to whatever it is that's making these contacts with her. I think it's augmented her link with their source. I haven't been getting what she's been getting. Not the way she's been getting it."

"Yet you say this happens simultaneously with the quakes?" Laryan queried.

"Every time," agreed the Doctor.

"And earlier you talked about saving the planet. So what's the relation between what Finn is experiencing, and that?"

The Doctor didn't answer, merely raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at Professor Ehrath. Laryan realized that if Ehrath's credulity had been strained before, by the look on his face it was now at breaking point. And that it might be wise to confine any further exchanges to the original group, certainly until he knew what theory the Doctor was proposing.

"Ehrath, thanks for coming – I knew you'd want to hear about the Nithlon," he said to his colleague, smoothly. "But we mustn't keep you from your proper work, not now we're back onto the astrogeological aspects of the situation. Tell you what, I'll catch up with you later and let you know what conclusions we come to – how would that be?"

Ehrath nodded in stunned acquiescence.

"Yes... Yes, of course," he agreed, docilely. He looked at Laryan, then the Doctor, and finally at Finn, before shaking his head ruefully. "It's been a lot to take in! But, I have to say" – suddenly, his face and eyes were animated again, almost mischievous – "it's actually been rather interesting, you know!" He squared his shoulders and looked at Laryan again. "Right, then, Laryan – I'll look forward to the update. With interest!"

He flashed a brief smile at everyone, then walked slowly to the lab door. He paused before leaving, his eyes unfocused, his long fingers resting absently on the handle; clearly he was already unaware of them, instinctively plunged into analysis of what he'd just learned. Then he went through the door, and closed it behind him.

Finn looked at Laryan, blew out her cheeks, and tilted her eyebrows at him.

"I know just how he feels," she remarked. "Information overload... And thanks for the character reference, by the way."

He smiled.

"I simply speak the truth as I see it," he said. "That just happens to be my assessment of you, that's all. Now" – he turned to the Doctor, who was regarding the exchange with amusement – "to reiterate: what's the relation between Finn's experiences and saving the planet? Saving it from what?"

"From whatever it is that Ghyron discovered," said the Doctor. He turned to Cyraenie. "Exactly what did Ghyron say to you, the last time you saw him?"

She thought hard.

"He said..." – she hesitated – "he said he'd put a report in to the Administrator about something, and Zarramin wanted to talk to him about it. He said there were things in it people weren't going to like. He made me promise not to tell anyone he'd even mentioned it to me – other than the Professor. Then he said we were all going to need luck." She looked up, her eyes rather overbright. "I never saw him again. Though..."

The Doctor leaped onto her hesitation. "Though what?" he asked quickly.

"It was strange... I've only just remembered... Professor, you know his soobit? The one he always kept on his desk?"

Laryan nodded. "Destroyed by the fire, I assume."

"No! No, it wasn't! You see, two days after he disappeared, I found it. In my rooms! I saw him put it in his pocket before he went to see the Administrator. But somehow, after that, he must have managed to get into my rooms and hid it there. There was a message with it – *"Please keep me safe, and please keep me secret."* I don't understand what he meant, and in any case I forgot about it until now, with everything else that's happened." She looked around their faces, anxiously. "Sorry..."

"Of course you forgot about it, in the circumstances," said Laryan, understandingly. "But I think it would be a good idea if we took a look at it now, don't you?"

Cyraenie leapt to her feet and fled for the door.

"I'll be quick as I can!" she promised, and vanished.

"What's a soobit?" Finn asked.

"Those little furry creatures we saw," the Doctor reminded her. "Remember? Ashlaik said they were soobits."

"Oh, *those*," she acknowledged, with a half-smile. "The cute'n'cuddly ones. I liked them!"

"Ghyron was a very gifted amateur artist," Laryan remarked. "He included wood carving and sculpture among his talents. He was always making figures of the various types of creatures on Felindre, but he had a particularly soft spot for soobits. The one that Cyraenie mentioned – he always kept that on his desk." He looked thoughtful. "I wonder how he got past the biometrics to get it into her apartment? He must've had some very overpowering reason to want to do that. To protect it from someone, presumably. He obviously didn't regard his own quarters as safe enough."

"But why? If it's just a carved figure...?" Finn asked.

"Presumably it's something more than that," said the Doctor meaningfully. Then, turning to Laryan with a complete change of tone, "So, Professor – you can vouch for Cyraenie's whereabouts earlier, by the sound of it. But where's Ansalar? Haven't seen her since our little confab first thing this morning."

Laryan gave this remark due consideration, and realized it was true.

"No, neither have I," he said slowly. "I have no idea where she is. Interesting..."

"Might be," the Doctor agreed, looking at Finn significantly.

For a moment, she was puzzled. Then she realized what he meant. He'd said it was a woman who had been at the top of the airbridge, who must have sabotaged the train. And at that time Cyraenie, Helenay and Ansalar had all been on the list of possible suspects. But Laryan was Cyraenie's alibi, and Helenay had been on the other end of Finn's own emergency call from the train.

Whereas Ansalar...

## Chapter 15

### *The Secret of the Soobit*

"Hello, Professor Ehrath," said a voice, plucking the pensive biologist out of the brown study in which he had been immersed as he absently headed back towards his own laboratory.

Startled, he looked up, and found Zarramin regarding him with a quizzical look.

"Oh! Administrator! Do forgive me! I was somewhere else entirely..."

"Sorry to disturb you, then," Zarramin apologized.

"I doubt you could have disturbed me any more than I already was," said Ehrath ruefully. "Or am."

"Why? What's happened? It's not that wretched business of the train crash?"

"Oh, no, no, no! But I *have* been talking with the Investigator and his assistant. And that's what I found disturbing! Professionally, speaking, that is."



Zarramin frowned.

“Disturbing?” he repeated. “In what way?”

“You won’t believe me,” Ehrath warned him. “*I* didn’t believe *them*, to start with...!”

\*

Everyone looked round as Cyraenie burst urgently back into the Astrogeology lab, something clutched in one hand, which she extended toward the Doctor.

“Ah! Thanks!” said the Doctor, taking it from her without yet looking at it. “One thing first, though – do *you* know where Ansalar is? The Professor hasn’t seen her since first thing this morning.”

Cyraenie blinked.

“Neither have I,” she admitted. “Why? Does it matter?”

“Hope not,” said the Doctor. “Now, what have we got here?” He held up the thing that Cyraenie had given him, rotating it in his fingers so that everyone had a clear view, before offering it to Finn.

She looked at it closely. A beautifully carved figurine of a soobit, no more than three inches high, expertly – if somewhat thickly – painted to reproduce the exact colouration of the fur. It has been posed sitting erect on its back legs, with tiny black beads of eyes, paws clasped against its chest, the prehensile-looking tail wound around its feet. A beautiful piece of craftsmanship, but there was nothing to indicate to her why Ghyron had gone to such lengths to hide it before his death.

She handed it on to Laryan, throwing a mystified look in the Doctor’s direction; Laryan, with Cyraenie peering over his shoulder, subjected it to a similar examination before passing it back to the Doctor.

“And what are we to make of it?” he enquired, dropping it into the Doctor’s outstretched palm.

The Doctor didn’t answer, but produced the sonic screwdriver and pointed it at the soobit.

“What’s that?” Cyraenie asked.

The Doctor looked at the sonic as if he’d never seen it before, then at her.

“This? Oh, this is a sort of – well, scanner, if you like,” he said hurriedly.

“Really? I’ve never seen one like it before,” Laryan commented, with eloquent eyebrows.

“Ah... Well, it’s a recent issue to Investigators. Very new. Very useful!” The Doctor turned his attention back to the readings it was giving him. “Not just very,” he added, with growing enthusiasm. “Immensely! Incredibly! Profoundly! *Seriously* useful!”

“Because...?” Laryan prompted, amused.

“Because of this,” said the Doctor. He put the soobit down onto the nearest desk, flipped the sonic to a new setting, and pointed it at the little figure. Without warning, it split neatly into two around the waist. The Doctor tucked the sonic away again before reaching down and pulling the two halves apart. Something fell to the surface of the desk between them. He picked it up and brandished it triumphantly at everyone.

Between the tips of those long, elegant fingers of his, he was holding a miniaturized memory card.

\*

Ansalar was sitting on the edge of her bed, face buried in her hands. She felt incredibly weary. So tired of all the lies, the pretence, the pressure. The blackmail. She’d so wanted to break with the past, leave the things she’d done behind her, disown and discard her criminal acts by making a new life, a new career. She’d thought this opportunity on Felindre would be the answer to everything.

But it seemed that even when you tried to leave such things behind, they wouldn’t leave you behind.

And to think she’d been so grateful to Zarramin when he’d appointed her to the staff despite having discovered her background! If only she’d known the kind of man he really was, she’d never have accepted his assurances...

A tear of self-pity trickled from the corner of one eye, as she contemplated the immediate past and the potential future. What was she to do? How could she escape this terrible cycle she was locked into?

She wasn't given the time to pursue that question. The communicator sprang into life, demanding an answer.

Not her personal communicator. The other one. The secret one.

She stared at it for some moments. Then, reluctantly, she reached out and activated it.

"Where've you been?" hissed the voice at the other end, indignantly.

"It took me a while to get back down from One," she said wearily. "I was trying to make sure no-one noticed me. But the Doctor's a clever man. He must be on to me by now. He's bound to have noticed I've been missing."

"Nevertheless, there's something else I want you to do."

"What if I don't want to?" she suggested almost curiously, as if she had a choice.

"Ansalar, if *I* want you to do something, what *you* want is irrelevant," he assured her in steely tones. "Unless you want me to completely expose your real identity to your colleagues, of course. And your employers. And anyone else upon whom you might have been relying for your future prospects."

"Wouldn't that expose *your* real self, too, Zarramin?" she challenged.

"Me? Oh, no, my dear. I'm too respected, too esteemed. You don't get to be a Planetary Administrator without having a lot of powerful friends. *Very* powerful friends. My word against the word of a convicted murderess, who so cleverly faked her new identity that even I was completely taken in? A mistake anyone could have made in my place, in the circumstances? No, I'm safe enough. But you *aren't*. So you *will* do what I tell you. Won't you?" he finished, complacently.

She sat silently raging, wishing she could throw it all back in his face. But she couldn't, or any chance she had of getting through this nightmare and eventually being free of him would be entirely gone. She just had to grit her teeth and take it.

"What is it you want me to do?" She could imagine his smile as he heard the sick defeat in her voice.

"That girl, Finn Thornton," he said. "I've learned that she, specifically, presents a threat to my plans. I don't care how you do it, but I want that threat removed. Permanently. And immediately. Do you understand me?"

"Of course I understand you!" she snapped violently, and cut the communication between them.

She sat for a few moments, staring resentfully at the unit in her hand before throwing it angrily onto the floor, where it skittered across the surface until it hit the base of the wall.

"Of course I understand you," she repeated, in a savage whisper.

\*

In the Astrogeology lab, everyone was clustered around the Doctor as he attempted to access the memory card's data.

"Blimey!" he grunted, peering intently through his glasses. "Your Ghyron wasn't just an artist with sculpture. He was a bit of an artist with encryption, too! Whatever's on this card, he really meant it to stay secret!"

"Difficult?" Finn asked.

"Very! Even for me – and that's saying something! Cyraenie – Professor – I'm going to need your help with this," the Doctor announced. "He's using multiple layers of inter-linked keywording, and I'm going to need a lead from you on what some of them might be. You knew him, so you're better placed to identify the ones he's likely to have used."

"Right!" said Laryan, in a businesslike manner, and Cyraenie nodded.

Finn stood back, thinking that if the Doctor was finding it complicated, there was nothing she was likely to be able to contribute to proceedings. She felt distinctly superfluous.

Laryan noticed her expression, and quickly deduced the reason.

"Why don't you go to your suite and try to relax for a while?" he suggested, kindly. "You've had quite a day so far. And once we've unencrypted the data, I'll wager anything you like there'll be some action to be taken then,

once we know what this danger is that Ghyron discovered! So we'll need you back with us then, at full fighting strength. Don't you think?"

The Doctor looked at him and then at Finn, belatedly realizing he was probably the one who should have been making that suggestion. Finn caught his expression and couldn't help smiling; sometimes he was so transparent. And so predictable!

"I do feel a bit tired," she admitted. "Probably reaction, or something. That's a good idea, Professor – thank you. Somebody tell me if anything exciting happens, won't they?"

"Course we will," the Doctor assured her. "Leave you out of any excitement? Wouldn't dare!"

"Thanks – I think...!" She gave him another smile, and left the lab.

The Doctor watched her go, a bit anxiously; he kept forgetting that the constant risks of his lifestyle were something she was still getting used to. Still, she seemed to be coping. He returned his attention to the screen, wrinkling his nose at the display.

Finn'd be all right, he was sure.

## **Chapter 16**

### ***A Problem Put on Ice***

As Finn made her way back to the suite, she was unaware of being under surveillance. But her every move was being observed.

Ansalar couldn't believe her luck. She'd been wondering how she could separate Finn from the Doctor; she wouldn't have wanted to try anything while he was around. She still couldn't understand how they'd survived what should have been the consequences of the sabotage she'd committed against the train, but from what she'd picked up from the conversations of other people, in some unknown way he'd been responsible for that.

But now here was Finn, alone. Vulnerable. And Zarramin had issued her death sentence.

Which she, Ansalar, had no choice but to carry out, if she was to ensure her own future.

She watched the unsuspecting girl use the biometric panel and go into the suite.

This time, there must be no mistake.

And she knew just how she was going to do it. There was no way Finn Thornton would survive what Ansalar was going to do to her this time.

\*

Finn, stretched out on top of the bed, hadn't been asleep more than a few minutes when an insistent summons from her communicator unit roused her again. She blinked at it, wondering if the Doctor had solved the problem of Ghyron's encryption already. She sat up and took the communicator up from the table on which she'd left it.

"Hello," she said, hoping she didn't sound as dozy as she felt.

"Finn Thornton..." hissed a voice, so distorted that she couldn't even tell whether it was a man or a woman speaking.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

"I have – information... We need to meet."

Finn rubbed her eyes, trying to rise to the situation, and think concisely.

"Well, come here, then," she suggested. "To my suite. We'd be in private here."

"No!" exclaimed the voice, as if alarmed. "I can't risk being seen... You must come to me!"

"All right," agreed Finn. "I'll just wait for the Doctor to come back, and we can both come."

“No!” exclaimed the voice again. “No Doctor! I won’t talk to anyone but you! If you include him, I won’t tell you anything! Look, hurry and make your mind up! I can’t wait. It’s got to be now. I mustn’t be missed.”

Finn didn’t like the sound of it, but, on the other hand, could she afford to risk missing some vital disclosure?

“All right,” she said, reluctantly. “Where do you want to meet?”

“Come to the Laboratory Block. Ground floor – Corridor 7. The end of the corridor. I’ll be waiting for you...”

A sudden click told her the communicator had been shut off at the other end.

Finn looked at the communicator unit unhappily. But there seemed no alternative.

Should she tell the Doctor about this? Or should she show a bit of initiative, and tell him about what she learned afterwards? After all, provided she was careful, why should there be a problem?

“Come on, Thornton, don’t be a wimp,” she told herself severely. “Just do what he’d do, why don’t you?” Which, she felt sure, wouldn’t have included bothering to tell her where he was going!

But he certainly would have gone to find out what the mystery contact wanted, right now. So that was what she’d do, in his place. She stood up decisively, shoving the communicator into her pocket.

It didn’t take her long to find her way. Corridor 7 turned out to be a dead-end corridor branching off the main corridor: an arrow on the wall pointed to the “Cold Storage Facility”. At the far end was a door, slightly ajar. There was no-one in sight.

Whoever wanted to meet her must be behind that door, she supposed. Cautiously she approached it.

There was a viewing panel in it; when she peered through into the space beyond all she could see was a small room with a second door in the far wall, its viewing panel pulled closed, and a kind of clothes rail, with what appeared to be Arctic-type protective suites hanging on it.

Which provided an immediate clue to the purpose of the room beyond. As did the LED-style panel on the far wall, reading ‘-25 degrees’ in large red numbers – presumably the TARDIS was translating for her whatever unit of temperature measurement they used locally; they’d probably never even heard of Anders Celsius in this galaxy.

But the main thing was there didn’t appear to be anyone there.

Carefully, she pushed the door further open, and put her head round it. There was definitely no-one there. But the second door, she noticed, was also slightly ajar. Was that where her unknown contact was waiting?

“Hello?” she ventured, nervously. “Are you there?”

No reply.

She walked across to the second door, and paused, listening. She could feel a movement of extremely cold air filtering through the gap, but could hear absolutely nothing.

“Hello?” she tried again. “It’s me – Finn...”

Still no answer.

There was nothing for it but. She pushed the door open, slowly, and took one step over the threshold.

She had only time for the briefest glimpse of the racks of ice cores marching away in rows in front of her before an arm reached around the doorway so suddenly that she had no time to react. It seized her wrist and heaved her forward. Her shoes slipped on the icy floor underfoot and she sprawled forward heavily; her head made sharp contact with the metal edge of the nearest rack.

Dizziness and shock immobilized her for a moment, but not so much that she didn’t feel her pockets being roughly searched, and something being taken; but by the time she was coherent enough to decide she needed to get to her feet, the door was already being slammed behind her. She heard the lock click, ominously. Then, a few seconds later, a further, fainter click. Whoever it was had locked the outer door, too.

She stumbled forward on the slippery floor and heaved on the handle – briefly, before her unprotected fingers froze to it – but to no purpose. And there was no response when she yelled to her assailant to let her out. Which was a pointless thing to do in any case, she realized; if they’d gone to all this trouble to trap her, they weren’t exactly going to let her go just for the asking. There was nothing she could do.

Wait a minute – her communicator unit! She reached into her pocket for it.

It was gone.

Of course; that was what her assailant had taken from her. So she'd have no way of contacting anyone for help.

Strangely, it wasn't until then that the true extremity of her situation struck her, along with the sensation of the freezing air that until now she hadn't had time to acknowledge. But now she realized just how much trouble she was in.

She was locked in a cold storage facility, designed to keep ice cores below freezing. And what she was wearing was totally inadequate to cope with such an environment. The Doctor's memory helpfully chose this moment to surface in her mind and inform her that humans, in an environment of minus twenty degrees centigrade, became unconscious within an hour, and died within six to seven hours.

If she couldn't get out, she was, quite literally, going to freeze to death.

It took her only a few desperate moments to establish that there was no other way out of the storage room – only the one door. The reinforced metal one. The locked one.

Already she was shivering uncontrollably as the icy air assaulted her unprotected skin.

She was going to have to hope that the Doctor noticed her absence soon.

Very soon.

\*

"Got it!" the Doctor yelled, leaping to his feet so suddenly that he made Cyraenie jump. One hand at the base of her throat, she joined Laryan at the Doctor's screen, watching the encryption melting away, leaving recognizable binary code behind. The Doctor seized each side of the monitor as he watched the data decoding at an accelerating rate. "You *beauty*!" he crowed, triumphantly, and, leaning forward, treated the screen to a smacking kiss.

After what seemed an endless wait, the encryption totally vanished, leaving what seemed like a uncountable number of screens filled with zeros and ones.

"Now, what've you got that'll turn this into normal words and numbers?" the Doctor demanded.

"I can do that," Cyraenie offered. She began to move toward the screen, but the Doctor stayed her.

"Hang on," he said. "Don't want this lot going AWOL again. Let's take a backup. Let's take a *couple* of backups! Safety in numbers." He looked at the screen again. "And we've got plenty of numbers here! So let's make them plenty safe, shall we?"

Cyraenie smiled, and her fingers danced over the keyboard.

"Two backups, coming up," she promised. "This'll only take a few minutes."

"Then we can convert the binary into alphanumeric characters," said Laryan. "But most of it'll probably still be completely raw data. We'll need to process it through our software systems before it'll be available in the form Ghyron would have used to compile his report. And there seems to be a prodigious amount of it," he remarked, watching the progress of the backup procedure. "Whatever his theory was, it seems to have required a great deal of very complex proof. This is going to be rather interesting, I suspect..."

"How long's this all going to take?" the Doctor enquired.

"This amount of data? And I suspect he'll have configured it for our most complex modelling software... I think we're talking a couple of hours, at the very least," Laryan estimated. "Maybe more."

The Doctor sighed.

"Hate waiting for the film of the book," he commented. "Hope the plot turns out to be worth it!"

"I doubt you're going to be disappointed on that score," Laryan commented drily.

They all looked up as the lab door opened, and Ashlaik came in.

"Hello, Doctor," he said. "I came to see if you're all right. And Finn. Is she all right?" He looked around the lab, realizing Finn wasn't one of the little group around the computer. "Where is she?"

"Oh, we packed her off to bed about" – the Doctor frowned, realizing he had no idea how long ago – "actually, I don't know how long ago. How long ago, Cyraenie?"

“About two hours, Doctor,” she informed him.

“As long as that? Really? Goodness! How time flies, when you’re enjoying yourself,” said the Doctor.

“About two hours ago,” he repeated helpfully, turning back to Ashlaik.

“Oh,” said Ashlaik. “Right. Do you think I should check on her?”

“Can if you like,” said the Doctor cheerfully. “I’d give it another hour, though. Give her time for a good sleep.”

“Okay,” said Ashlaik. “I’ll do that.”

“Meanwhile,” said the Doctor, turning back to his screen as Ashlaik left, “something occurs to me. What, exactly, is the problem with that Panoptes Array of yours?”

“A software malfunction,” said Cyraenie. “So I was told. Not sure I quite believe that any more...”

“Oh, you can believe it malfunctioned, absolutely,” the Doctor assured her. “Cause of the malfunction – well, that’s more up for debate... So let’s take a look. Where are the system files?”

\*

In the Cold Storage Facility, the racks of ice cores stood silently in the sub-zero temperatures, the secrets they held in their crystals still sacrosanct, waiting for release.

Nothing else moved in the frozen chamber.

Certainly not the huddled figure on the frost-rimed floor.



## **Chapter 17**

### ***The Freezer***

The appointed hour later, Ashlaik reappeared through the lab door.

“Doctor,” he said, rather diffidently.

He didn’t get an immediate response. The Doctor was still busy scanning through the software for the Panoptes Array, and completely ignored his arrival.

“Nearly there!” he announced to the room at large. “Just a few more tweaks, and we’ll have you back online, Professor.”

“Thanks, but you’ve got a visitor,” Laryan pointed out, gently.

The Doctor looked at him, surprised, then followed the direction of his gaze toward Ashlaik.

“Oh! Ah! Ashlaik! There you are! How is she?” he asked, cheerfully.

“I don’t know,” Ashlaik said. “I couldn’t contact her. There wasn’t any answer when I tried the door, and she didn’t answer when I used the communicator.”

“She must be a very sound sleeper,” Cyraenie observed. “You can’t usually ignore the racket a communicator makes.”

The Doctor looked at her, then back at Ashlaik. For some reason he couldn’t quite identify, he didn’t like the sound of that.

He looked at Laryan, who looked gravely back.

“Perhaps you ought to go and check on her yourself, Doctor,” he suggested. “Take Cyraenie with you. I’m sure the Array can keep until you get back.”

“I don’t want you here on your own,” the Doctor disagreed instantly. “Somebody still wants to stop whatever’s buried in this data getting out. I’m not risking either you or it.”

“You won’t be,” Laryan assured him. “Because Ashlaik’ll stay here with me. Won’t you, Ashlaik? The two of us’ll keep guard over it until you get back.”

Ashlaik nodded. “Er – what exactly is it we’re guarding?” he asked uncertainly.

“Oh, the Professor’ll tell you all about it,” the Doctor promised, already on his way to the door. “Come on, Cyraenie – let’s go and make sure Finn’s safe.” He paused. “Did I say ‘safe’? I meant ‘all right’. Of course she’s safe. Definitely safe. Completely safe. Must be. We just need to check on the ‘all right’ bit.”

He looked around at their faces; nobody commented on the fact that he wasn’t even convincing himself, let alone them.

“Right,” he said, more decisively. “Come on, then!” And he bolted out, Cyraenie on his heels.

Laryan, without comment, moved into the Doctor’s vacated seat. Ashlaik, looking worried, came over and sat down by him, looking with muted curiosity at the torrent of information on the screen.

“So what is it we’re guarding, Professor?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

“Not entirely clear on that myself, yet,” said Laryan, calmly. “Though I’m beginning to have suspicions. But it’s a very interesting story to date. Are you sitting comfortably...?”

\*

The Doctor raced to the door of their suite far enough ahead of Cyraenie for her not to spot that he was opening the door with the sonic screwdriver, not the proper biometric system – though he slapped his palm briefly onto the panel, just for show.

But once inside, he realized the anxiety that had been growing in him since he’d left the lab had obviously been justified. Finn wasn’t in the bedroom; wasn’t in any of the rooms. He stood in the middle of the living room, thinking furiously, while Cyraenie double-checked everywhere, as if she expected to find something he hadn’t.

“Where is she?” she asked, helplessly. “What’s happened to her?”

She took an involuntary pace backwards as the Doctor turned a manic glare on her; for a moment she was very frightened, until she realized it wasn’t really directed at her personally.

“I don’t know,” he said, through set teeth. “But if anyone’s harmed her –!” He didn’t complete the sentence, but Cyraenie found herself feeling distinctly glad she wasn’t the ‘anyone’ in question.

“Come on!” snapped the Doctor. “We’ve got to find her! Now!” He hurtled towards the door again and took off down the corridor.

Cyraenie followed, not realizing she was doing something that most people who spent time around the Doctor had to do, at some time or another.

Run.

Very, very fast.

\*

Sitting in his office, Zarramin checked the time, and smiled a distinctly unpleasant smile of satisfaction. Ansalar had reported back to him on what she'd done. He'd been secretly rather impressed; it really was rather an inventive way to kill someone. Because by now, Finn Thornton must certainly be dead. Most definitely a frozen asset!

Zarramin chuckled to himself.

He did so love a dead certainty.

\*

An hour of increasingly frenetic searching had finally brought the Doctor and Cyraenie back to the Laboratory Block. And, finally, to Corridor 7.

The Doctor looked at the sturdy metal door at the end of the corridor.

"What's in here?" he asked, dashing over to it and peering in through the glass viewing pane. What he could see was a small chamber, a bit like an airlock, with another, similar door at the other end. Except that the viewing pane in that one had been closed off by a sliding metal panel. On the left was the clothes rail with its row of protective suits.

"That's the freezer," said Cyraenie, with a slight smile. "That's what we call it, anyway. Pellamun – he studies the glaciers – he keeps his ice cores in there. For atmospheric research, that kind of thing. It has to be kept at least twenty degrees below freezing to protect them. That's one reason why it's got two doors – to make sure warm air doesn't leak in."

"Can I see?" asked the Doctor, not waiting for an answer before trying the door handle.

It wouldn't budge.

"That's odd," said Cyraenie. "It's never kept locked normally." She came over and tried the handle herself – same result. "That's not right," she declared. "I'll get the key card."

She headed over to a small metal cabinet affixed to the wall, and opened it.

As she did, the Doctor surreptitiously slid the sonic screwdriver out of his breast pocket and aimed it briefly at the lock.

"I'll just give it another try," he said, reaching out. Of course, the handle turned without any resistance. "Oh, look – it must've just been a bit stuck. All right now."

"Just as well," said Cyraenie, turning to him with a frown that made a little arrow-shaped furrow between her eyebrows. "The key card's not here."

An alarm bell began to sound in the Doctor's mind. Quickly he strode through the little chamber to the other door, and grasped the handle.

Like the first, it refused to move.

The Doctor slid back the metal panel covering the viewing pane, and looked into the room beyond.

On the floor, leaning against one of the racks, Finn was crouched. Her eyes were closed, her body curled in on itself with her arms clasped against her chest, her knees drawn up to her chin. She was covered with a rime of frost, and she was absolutely motionless.

With no attempt to disassemble this time, the Doctor instantly fired the sonic screwdriver at the second lock, threw the door open, and raced between the racks of ice cores, Cyraenie on his heels.

He heard her gasp as the abrupt drop in temperature hit her skin, but he took no notice. He simply dropped to one knee, scooped Finn up in his arms, and ran out again. Cyraenie shut the door behind them, cutting off the blast of frozen air that followed them out.

"She's not dead, is she?" she asked, horrified, as she turned to where the Doctor had laid Finn out on the corridor floor.

He didn't answer; he was leaning over Finn, one of her hands clasped against his chest, his eyes urgently scanning her face.

Then, with utter astonishment, Cyraenie saw the girl's eyelids flutter open. How could that be *possible*?



Finn's eyes and the Doctor's locked together, and Cyraenie saw an identical smile of relief and joy mirrored on both faces. But the question persisted – how *could* Finn have survived? Surely there was no way...!

"No, she's not dead," said the Doctor, finally answering Cyraenie's question, continuing to smile into Finn's eyes. "Bit too chilly for comfort, though. Let's get her somewhere a bit warmer, shall we?"

Finn's lips opened, and she forced a hoarse whisper out between them, blinking the melting rime out of her eyes.

"Gets my vote..." she murmured.

## Chapter 18

### *The Consequences of Being a Danger*

As the Doctor vigorously declined alerting any official channels, which taking Finn to the medical centre would certainly have achieved, Cyraenie hurried them to her own rooms, where she made the Doctor wait while she helped Finn out of her own clothes, now becoming damp as the rime melted into them, and into a thick wrapover robe of her own. Finn found she needed the help; her limbs were stiff, her fingers didn't yet answer properly to her will.

The Doctor was pacing impatiently around the living area, but stopped as soon as the bedroom door opened; he leapt across to them and helped Cyraenie install Finn on the couch.

"I'll get something hot for you to drink," Cyraenie said, and went into the tiny kitchen area.

The Doctor knelt in front of Finn, and looked at her, his eyes a mix of elation, relief, and anxiety. He put a finger to his lips and gestured with his head toward the kitchen door, indicating he didn't want Cyraenie to hear their conversation. Finn signalled her comprehension with a long, slow blink of her eyelids.

"All right?" the Doctor asked, in a low voice.

"Spect I will be, before long," she said. Then, with a subdued twinkle in her eye, "Hope that's not *cold comfort*..."

The Doctor grinned briefly.

"No, it's your insulation membrane," he said, lightly.

"Is it still working?" Finn asked, surprised.

"Or you wouldn't be here," the Doctor agreed. "Each application lasts about six months. Yours hasn't worn off yet. In your personal timeline, it's less than that since we went to Kvitverden. Thank goodness."

"Does Cyraenie know that? About the membrane, I mean?"

"No. Can't exactly tell her, either. Hasn't been invented yet." The Doctor pulled a face that indicated he hadn't yet worked out how he was going to explain that one. Then he set the matter aside in favour of more important matters. "What happened?" he asked, sounding rather grim.

"Someone called me," she said. "Told me they had some information. They didn't speak normally. More like whispering, really. Didn't recognize them, whoever it was."

"Man or woman?"

"Couldn't tell." She looked apologetic. "When I got here, the doors were both ajar. I'd barely got to the second one when someone reached around it, grabbed my arm, and threw me inside. Never saw who it was. They took my communicator. By the time I'd picked myself up, the door was shut and locked. I couldn't open it, and there wasn't anyone to hear me. Not sure if they could have, through two locked doors, in any case. So all I could do was – wait."

*For you.* He could hear the unspoken words quivering in his own head, and they daunted him. If it hadn't been for the insulation membrane, Finn would now be dead.

Because he would never have found her in time. In the end, of course he would've *found* her – *but not in time*. He could have lost her forever. All because she couldn't open a door. Which wouldn't have been a problem, if he'd been with her. But he hadn't. Unlike him, she didn't have a sonic screwdriver.

And she might have died because of it...

She put out a hand to touch his forearm.

"I hope that look doesn't mean you're blaming yourself," she said, sounding quite severe.

"Course it does," he contradicted her. "Who else is there?"

"Well, you could always try whoever it was that locked me in there," she suggested, with an air of pointing out the obvious. "They seem a much more logical candidate, to me."

He thought about that, and nodded.

"Okay, fine by me," he said. "I'll definitely blame *them*. Much better solution."

Finn chuckled.

"I think so," she agreed.

\*

"I don't understand how she could have survived such a low temperature for such a long time," Cyraenie said, perplexed. "She must have been in the freezer for *hours*. How *could* she survive?"

She glanced through the open bedroom door to where Finn, having downed the hot drink Cyraenie had provided, was now sleeping.

"More to the point, who locked her in there?" said the Doctor, hoping that if he talked quickly enough, he wouldn't have to explain about the insulation membrane. "Two doors, both locked, key missing – she didn't do that herself. Someone deliberately trapped her in there, intending her to freeze to death."

Cyraenie stared at him.

"But who would want to do that?" she asked, taken aback. "Why?"

"Just what I'd like to know," said the Doctor, frowning intently. "The 'why', I mean. I'm pretty sure I know the 'who'. In fact," he amended, "I'm pretty sure I know the overall 'why'. But not why they were singling out Finn this time." He stared through the door at the sleeping girl with eyes so dark, so grim, that Cyraenie couldn't stop herself shivering. Once again, she was thankful she was not the target of his anger.

Then his face changed, as an expression of realization spread across it.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" he exclaimed, suddenly leaping to his feet, both hands held out before him with forefingers poised, before abruptly sitting down again. "Unless –! *Unless* –!"

"Unless what?" Cyraenie demanded.

"Unless our friend Professor Ehrath unwittingly let the cat out of the bag!"

"Cat –?" she repeated, not understanding the phrase.

"Yes! Yes, I'll bet that's what happened! I'll bet he was stumbling away from our conversation, trying to take it all in, and repeated some of it to someone. Not realizing that that someone would recognize it as a danger."

"What danger?"

"The danger Finn represented to their plans. To themselves."

"What – just because she knows when an earthquake's happening?" Cyraenie demanded in disbelief. "How could that be a danger to anyone?"

"No, not that," said the Doctor dismissively. "It's *how* she knows that's dangerous to them. And where she's getting it from. Of course, that *must* be it...! No wonder they wanted her out of the way."

"Doctor, I don't understand," Cyraenie complained.

He smiled at her.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "You will. Now, I think it's time we told the Professor the good news, don't you?"

"And Ashlaik," she smiled. "Don't forget Ashlaik. I've got a feeling he'll want to know, too – don't you think so?"

"Ah – you've noticed that, too, have you?" he agreed, with an equally mischievous grin.

“Er – did you miss me?” asked a quiet voice from the laboratory door.

Ashlaik and Laryan looked up to see Finn framed in the doorway, the Doctor and Cyraenie behind her.

“Finn!” Ashlaik exclaimed, and hurried over to her, taking her hands. “Are you all right?”

She smiled at him, looking a touch embarrassed.

“More or less,” she said.

“Rating A Star Plus, I’d say,” said the Doctor, following her in, Cyraenie on his heels. “Despite someone’s best efforts to the contrary.”

“Sorry, everyone,” said Finn, making her way across the lab to where Laryan, too, had risen to his feet. She sat down in the chair next to his, and looked up at him. “Didn’t mean to give you the cold shoulder.” She grinned at him tentatively.

“My dear girl,” said Laryan, putting a hand on one of the shoulders in question for a brief moment. Cyraenie noted the action with some surprise; Laryan wasn’t normally a very demonstrative person in that way. He must have been very worried about Finn, she thought.

“Right! So! Have we got anywhere with the data?” said the Doctor briskly, taking Laryan’s chair. He scanned the screen. “Ooh! Yes, we have! Is this the finished version, Professor?”

“Yes, it is,” Laryan confirmed, and his voice was suddenly uncharacteristically grim. Everyone looked at him, while the Doctor raced through the screens of information at a rate no human eye could have matched. Finn cast a quick glance at him, and saw his expression was matching that of Laryan’s.

“Doctor,” she said. “What is it?”

He didn’t answer her, but went on glowering at the screen for a few moments. Then he looked at Ashlaik.

“Ashlaik, I need you do to something for me,” he said.

The young engineer nodded.

“Of course, Doctor. What is it?”

“Come with me.” The Doctor got to his feet and preceded Ashlaik as far as the door. The other three watched, mystified, as the Doctor issued a series of rapid-fire instructions in a voice too low for them to hear. Ashlaik looked startled, and seemed to be replying with some sort of protest, but the Doctor overrode him. Ashlaik eventually nodded, still looking perturbed, and left.

“Remember – tell me the moment anything happens!” the Doctor called after him, then slammed the door shut and raced back to the computer, plumping himself back into the chair with emphasis.

“Now – just got to finish fixing your Panoptes Array,” he said, his fingers racing over the keyboard. Laryan watched keenly as the systems on the screen suddenly began to flash green instead of red.

“You’ve done it!” he exclaimed.

“And these are the coordinates we need it to look at,” confirmed the Doctor. There was a short wait, during which nobody dared to speak, as if somehow doing so might affect the outcome of the array’s scan. Then data began to configure on the screen. Laryan leaned over the Doctor’s shoulder to gaze at it. The two men looked at each other; Laryan nodded, slowly.

“It seems he was right,” he said heavily. “So his theory – incredible as it seems – must be true.”

## **Chapter 19** ***Mother Planet***

“Do you mean Ghyron?” asked Cyraenie, impatiently. “Right about what? What’s true? What did he find out?”

“Something that got him killed,” said the Doctor, dourly.

“Something that nearly got us killed,” Finn reminded him. “So what is it?”

"It seems there's a spatial electrical storm travelling through inter-galactic space towards our galaxy," said Laryan heavily. "Who knows how long it's been on its travels? Millennia! But always inexorably closing in on the path of this galaxy. Ghyron detected it with the Array only very recently; he seems to have been experimenting with extending the parameters, and apparently found the storm completely by accident, only now that it's almost here. And that's what he discovered. That it's going to intersect with us *here*. Very soon – it's travelling at incredible speed, for such a phenomenon. Its angle of approach means that it'll only partially pass through the very edge of the Omaron Tegwith galaxy. But Felindre will lie in its path."

"And why's that dangerous?" Finn asked. Because clearly it was.

"Because this storm is broadcasting particular electromagnetic radiation wavelengths – radio waves. In most cases the solar systems and planets won't be affected; they lack atmospheres, and any form of life that we know about. But in the case of Felindre, the effect of the radiation will be to overload the atmosphere with ozone. You see" – Laryan explained to her kindly, seeing the incomprehension on her face – "oxygen in its most stable form, dioxygen, can be converted into ozone by electrical discharges and the action of high energy electromagnetic radiation. Both of which are being exhibited by this storm to a degree which suggests the conversion will take place with extreme rapidity. Which will be poisonous to all surface life on the planet."

"And – the moons?" Cyraenie asked, horror-stricken, though she must already have known the answer.

Laryan looked at her bleakly.

"No-o-o...!" She let a long drawn-out breath of protest, uselessly.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Finn directed her query at the Doctor, feeling sure it was a superfluous question, or he wouldn't be wearing the expression he was. He looked at her from under lowered eyebrows, but didn't answer.

Silence reigned for several seconds.

Then Finn remembered something.

"Doctor, you haven't explained what this has got to do with the earthquakes, and why I can feel them the way I do. What's that all about?"

"Ah, this was where Ghyron got a bit clever," said the Doctor, with more warmth. He sat up and looked round at all of them. From the expression on Laryan's face, Finn deduced that he'd bought into the Doctor's theory, but was still intellectually adjusting to it, whatever it was. *It must be a lulu*, Finn thought to herself; Laryan struck her as a very open-minded type, so if *he* was having trouble with it...

"He worked out why the earthquakes were happening," said the Doctor triumphantly, still talking about Ghyron. "Remember Cyraenie told us there were sudden releases of energy into the planet's crust, and nobody understood why? Ghyron worked it out. Did some serious thinking outside the box. And came up with the right answer."

He paused for dramatic effect. Finn had to bite down hard not to rise to it, but Cyraenie did.

"Well, what *is* the answer?" she demanded impatiently.

The Doctor grinned, irritatingly.

"Felindre knows the storm's coming," he said.

Cyraenie frowned in extreme perplexity; she clearly didn't understand what the Doctor was saying. But Finn began to.

"The planet knows?" she said carefully.

The Doctor grinned at her; he could see she was getting it.

"Yup," he confirmed, with delight.

Finn grappled with the concept she was being presented with. No wonder Laryan was still blinking! She took a deep breath and turned to Cyraenie.

"He means the planet's alive," she said. "A living, intelligent being." She glanced askance at the Doctor, wondering if she'd got it wrong and he was about to drop a contradiction on her like a ton of bricks. But, no – he was still grinning like a maniac.

Cyraenie's mouth dropped open.

“But – but – that’s *impossible!*” she managed, at last.

“What’s so impossible about a sentient planet?” the Doctor demanded. “I’ve met a sentient sun. Which was very peeved at the time, I might add. Nearly killed an entire freighter crew. And Martha. And me. Did kill some of us. Torajii, it was called.”

“Why?” Finn asked.

“I don’t know – that was just its name,” the Doctor shrugged.

“You high-powered nitwit!” she exclaimed in exasperation, rolling her eyes. “I *mean*, why did it kill them?”

“Oh! Because they’d used a sun scoop to refuel their ship. Takes plasma from a sun’s surface. Only this sun was alive. A living entity. And it hurt! Damaged it. So it was angry. If someone came up to you with an axe and suddenly cut your hand off to use as firewood, how would *you* react?”

Finn blew her cheeks out.

“Badly,” she admitted.

“However –! Back to the main point,” said the Doctor. “Which is that a sentient planet is perfectly possible.”

“But – but...” – Cyraenie was back to stuttering – “where is this sun? Why haven’t we heard about it? How did you –?”

Laryan broke in on her, before she could start asking – as Finn suspected she was about to – how an Interplanetary Agency Investigator would have encountered a sentient sun. Which made her cast a quick glance at him, wondering why he wasn’t asking the same question.

“I think the Doctor’s right, Cyraenie,” he said calmly, briefly putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“We should stick to the matter in hand, just now. So, Doctor – the connection between the quakes and the storm is – what, exactly? The planet knows the storm’s approaching, somehow. And that it’s in danger.”

“And the moons,” said Cyraenie, struggling to focus, as Laryan had suggested. “The moons’re in the same danger, aren’t they?”

The Doctor suddenly shot to his feet and gaped at her. Then he smacked himself on the forehead before grabbing Cyraenie by her shoulders and giving her a swift shake.

“That’s it!” he yelled. “Cyraenie, you’re brilliant! That’s the missing piece of the puzzle! Felindre’s not just sentient! She’s a *parent!*”

“*What?*” Finn exclaimed.

“Cyraenie had it right! Bang on!” the Doctor said, turning to her. “She called her ‘the mother planet’ – don’t you remember? And that’s exactly what she is! A mother! The mother of three moons! And every one of the little darlings the spitting image of her – atmosphere, flora, the lot! I bet when they get older they’ll be even more like her – I bet they’ll have all the bits of the ecosystem they don’t have yet! You know – the animals, the insects, everything!”

“But – but – how can a planet have children?” Finn demanded, incredulously.

“Several ways, that I can think of,” said the Doctor. “Though, imagine being a planetary gynaecologist, eh?” He took time out to wince at the thought. “Throwing a few bits of your own planetary matter into orbit around you would do, for starters. In this case, three bits – triplets. With all the same elements from which to grow all the same systems.”

“Then – then she’s not just afraid for herself,” Finn said slowly. The Doctor swept round everyone’s face with one of his more unsettling stares.

“No, she’s not,” he agreed. “She’s terrified for her *children*. The way any normal mother would be. She knows they’re in danger! And she’s desperate to protect them!”

“So the quakes are –?” Laryan prompted, looking as if he was beginning to understand.

“What do you do if you’re afraid?” demanded the Doctor. “You *shudder*.” He shook briefly, to demonstrate. “What do you do if you’re facing danger and you want to scream and you’ve got no voice? You *struggle*. That’s what the quakes are. Felindre’s terrified! Screaming for help! And nobody was listening!”

“Until Finn came along,” said Laryan, becoming more animated as the implications of what the Doctor was saying began to unfold. “And formed her telepathic link with the Nithlon. Which must mean that the Nithlon is

similarly linked to Felindre itself. So through that link, Finn is hearing” – he paused in momentary contemplation of the magnitude of the concept – “Finn is hearing the planet itself. Calling for help.”

There was another short silence. Finn looked at the Doctor and widened her eyes, as if to say, *Wow!* He gave her a nod of encouragement, which she accepted as she continued to think about the whole fantastic proposition. Then something occurred to her.

“Doctor, do you remember what the Nithlon said, when I said she was beautiful?”

“Yeah... She said ‘Felindre is beautiful,’” said the Doctor. “She said” – his eyes suddenly grew round as he remembered the full detail – “she said ‘I am only *part* of her!’”

“And then when I asked her what her name was,” Finn pursued the thought, “she said again, ‘Felindre – I’m part of her’. And remember what you’d been saying before that? How you’d never seen such a harmonious ecosystem? No predators?”

“Ohhh, you’re brilliant, too, Fionnula Thornton!” the Doctor glowed. “*Everyone’s* being just totally *brilliant* today!”

“Why, what do you mean?” Cyraenie asked.

“That the Nithlon was being literal! Everything *is* part of Felindre! All the animals, all the plants, everything! Like your hair, or your fingernails, or your eyelashes. They’re on your surface, but they’re all part of you. And all your cells, all the millions and billions and trillions of them – all individual cells, but all making up your body, *you*. Every one of them replaced at regular intervals through your lifetime, constantly rebuilding you.”

His eyes glowed with enthusiasm as he warmed to his theme.

“Same for every plant, every creature – individuals come, individuals go, but Felindre, the whole body, goes on. So, no predators – your cells don’t predate on each other; they work *together*. And that’s what Felindre does, because it’s effectively a single body – different ‘cells’, doing different things, but not in conflict. All run by the brain, Felindre itself. Which means...” He turned to Finn again, eyes wide and sparkling. “Which means, if we can find your friend the Nithlon, we can *talk* to Felindre!”

“Talk – to the planet?” Cyraenie was still having some trouble with the concept, but Laryan nodded.

“Worth a try,” he agreed. “But – what are you going to *say*? What *can* you say, in the circumstances?”

“Oh, I’ve got an idea about that,” the Doctor assured him. “But first –”

He broke off as his communicator buzzed.

“Doctor?” Ashlaik’s voice, lowered almost to a whisper, came through into the sudden silence.

“Yup, it’s me,” the Doctor confirmed. “Target on the move, is it?”

“Yes. And going just where you said, it looks like.”

“Righto! Keep your eyes peeled. I’ll be right there!” Without any apparent intention of explaining himself, the Doctor bounded toward the door.

“Doctor! Where are you going?” Finn called after him.

“Oh, just going to have a word with the person responsible for Ghyron’s death,” shrugged the Doctor, pausing in the doorway.

Cyraenie shot to her feet.

“You’re going to speak to Ghyron’s *murderer*?” she queried, harshly.

“Well, sort of,” qualified the Doctor. “Not the person that did the actual killing. That was someone else. This is the person who ordered it.”

“There are two of them? Who are they?” Cyraenie demanded. “*Why* did they do it?” The final words were more a cry of pain than a question.

The Doctor looked at her gravely.

“How did you know who it is?” Laryan supplemented with a question of his own. “And how long have you known?”

“Worked it out while Finn was sleeping,” said the Doctor. “Look, I’ll explain later. Right now, got to go – or I might miss them. Back in a mo!” And, quick as a flash, he was gone, leaving them to look at each other, temporarily wordless.



## Chapter 20

### *The Oncoming Storm*

The Doctor, hurtling through the Laboratory Block at full tilt, found Ashlaik lurking at a vantage point from where he could see the entrance to Corridor 7.

“Still there?” he hissed, skidding to a halt beside him. Ashlaik nodded.

“Right, stay here,” said the Doctor. “I’ll just wander down and have a quiet word...”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he sauntered casually down the corridor to the junction that led to the Cold Storage Facility, and planted himself in its centre, feet spread wide. Ahead of him, through the open first door, he could see the figure staring in through the viewing panel of the second door, its shoulders tight with tension.

“She’s not there, you know,” he said, raising his voice so it would carry to the person in the room beyond. “Sorry to disappoint you, but Finn Thornton’s alive and well, and helping Laryan and Cyraenie and me work out what we can do to save Felindre. Not just from the oncoming storm. Which is something I’ve been called, by the way,” he added, casually. “Quite an imposing title, but it’s got a certain ring to it, hasn’t it? Anyway, you don’t want to hear about that, do you? So where was I? Oh, yes. Saving Felindre. Not just from the storm. From *you*, as well.”

Slowly, Planetary Administrator One Four Three Zarramin turned to face him.

“Got worried once you realized Finn had a direct connection to the planet’s mind, didn’t you?” the Doctor continued. “Realized that’d put the crimp on your little plan, if anyone else found out about it. So she had to go, didn’t she? The same way Ghyron did, because he’d found out that Felindre *had* a mind. So no-one’d find out that you’ve been covering the whole thing up.”

“And I would want to do that, because...?” Zarramin said quietly, with an innocently enquiring upturn of voice at the end of the question. Under that apparently placid exterior, however, he was undoubtedly seething with suppressed anger.

“Because Felindre’s packed to the gunwales with tascenium,” said the Doctor bluntly. “One of the most valuable metals in the entire universe. But out of bounds to anyone here, because Felindre’s a Celestial Body of Outstanding Beauty. Which means no-one can mine the tascenium. But if all the life on the planet was destroyed – ooh, say, by a passing spatial electrical storm broadcasting just the right electromagnetic radiation wavelengths to do the job – oh, dear! Terrible tragedy! Very sad! Appalling loss of a unique ecosystem!”

He stopped caricaturing regret and rearranged his features into a falsely bright expression.

“But, hey, every cloud’s got a silver lining! No reason not to mine the tascenium now, eh? Not if the right arrangements can be made with the right people, who’ll pass over the right percentage of the profits. To *you*, Mr Planetary Administrator! Standing there wringing your hands with dismay over such an unforeseeable

calamity, eyes full of tears for other people's benefit but actually spinning with money symbols faster than a fruit machine..."

Zarramin didn't understand that last allusion, and it showed, before he restored his mask of polite disinterest. But he chose not to speak.

"So Ghyron, in his innocence, goes to you as Planetary Administrator, expecting you to do whatever you can to save at least the people here, if nothing else. But maybe start trying to save some of the flora and fauna to some other, safe location, so they wouldn't be totally lost, either. Instead, you arrange for his report to mysteriously vanish, and you get Ansalar – who's either in cahoots with you, or else you're blackmailing her in some way – to get rid of him and destroy his data. Without officially reporting his disappearance. But then I turn up, and start asking all the wrong questions as far as you're concerned."

The Doctor fixed Zarramin with an uncompromising stare.

"So now you need to get rid of me, too. Hence Ansalar's sabotage of the train. Oh, and remind me, will you – who was it that suggested that we make that trip up to Observatory One in the first place...? Oh, of course – *silly* me – how could I forget? It was *you*! But then we go and rather inconveniently survive that, don't we? Only for you to find out that Finn's got a telepathic link with the planet, making her an even more direct danger. So you get Ansalar on the case again. But she's not a very lucky assassin, is she? Three murder attempts, only one success. Not a particularly brilliant strike rate, is it?"

Zarramin still remained silent, but his eyes, fixed on the Doctor's, were glowing pools of anger, frustration and hatred.

"Anyway," the Doctor shrugged, "turns out Ghyron was too clever for you. Hid a backup of his data. Which we found. So it really wasn't very hard for me to work out who was behind it all, and why. It all goes back to Ghyron's report. Once I realized no-one else'd seen it but you – not even Helenay, though you tried to put her in the frame because she had the only other key – well, case solved."

The Doctor suddenly grinned manically.

"Ohhh, I *love* these Poirot bits, don't you? Whodunnit! The gathering of all the suspects at the end, before the final denouement – 'It was *you*!' S'pose I should've arranged this a bit better, actually – brought everyone else with me to witness the unmasking of the criminal. Oh, well, never mind – point is, it is you, Zarramin." The Doctor's voice was suddenly cold. "When I've got all the evidence collated, I don't think you'll be a Planetary Administrator much longer, do you? So any deals you were hoping to make about the tascenium won't work once this all comes to light – why would those hard-headed realists in whatever mining consortium you had in mind bother giving a cut to someone who's been publicly discredited?"

Zarramin's eyes still burned, but he affected a careless shrug.

"Very clever, I'm sure. Shame you can't save the planet, Doctor," he said, unsuccessfully attempting his customary silky tone, the rage he was trying to mask still coming to the surface as a hard, jagged edge to the silk. "Only a partial result to congratulate yourself on, I fear. In all the ways that matter to you most, I think, a quite signal failure!" He ground out the words with savage glee.

The Doctor smiled at him.

"You think so?" he said enigmatically. And without further explanation, turned and walked away, leaving Zarramin staring, confounded, at the space where he had been.

\*

"Right! Finn! Need to get hold of your Nithlon," said the Doctor, bursting energetically back into the Astrogeology lab, Ashlaik in tow.

"Nithlon?" asked Ashlaik, astonished. "What Nithlon?"

"Oh, Cyraenie'll explain it all to you – won't you, Cyraenie?" said the Doctor quickly. "In the meantime, Finn and the Professor and I are just popping outside for a few minutes. When you've finished explaining it all to Ashlaik, get back on the Panoptes Array and find out exactly how close that storm is, and let me know. Because



it wasn't that far away when Ghyron first found it, and it's been getting closer all the time. And I think it's been speeding up – the gravitational pull of a whole galaxy's been working on it, and getting stronger every hour. I need to know exactly when it's going to get here. Give me a call when you've found out, will you?"

As Cyraenie nodded, the Doctor turned to Finn.

"Right, let's get outside and see if you can 'phone a friend'," he said briskly. "Coming, Professor?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Laryan assured him. "Though that might not be the most appropriate phrase, in the circumstances..." he added thoughtfully.

The Doctor awarded him a brief grin.

"But, Doctor – who is it you went to see?" Cyraenie pleaded. "Who killed Ghyron?"

"Oh, Ashlaik can tell you all about that," the Doctor assured her. "He was there. And I'll tell the Professor, while we're on our way. But don't let it stop you getting that data on the storm. I seriously need that, okay?"

He charged out of the lab with Finn and Laryan in his wake, leaving Cyraenie and Ashlaik looking at one another, wondering who should start first.

\*

Ansalar looked up, startled, as the door to her apartment opened and Zarramin strode in.

"How did you get in?" she demanded.

"Planetary Administrators have all sorts of privileges not available to their staff," Zarramin smirked. "Among them, access to override the biometric system. And I have no time to waste."

"Why, what's happened?"

"The Doctor has discovered my" – Zarramin paused, searching for the appropriate word – "project concerning this planet and its resources. And has seen fit to make this known to four other people. Making them all a threat to me, and consequently to you."

"Who?" demanded Ansalar.

"Laryan. Cyraenie. Ashlaik. And Finn Thornton," Zarramin concluded, awarding her a glare.

Ansalar leapt to her feet, shocked.

"But she's dead!" she cried out. "She *must* be! I locked her in the freezer, hours ago! She *can't* still be alive!"

"But she is," Zarramin said smoothly. "As the Doctor himself observed, you've proved to be a most unsatisfactory assassin, my dear. But I'm going to give you one last chance to redeem yourself."

Ansalar looked at him, dreading his next words.

"How?" She compressed all her feelings into that one monosyllable.

"You're going to kill all five of them. And you're going to do it immediately. I don't care how – that's up to you. But you are going to remove every one of them from my path."

Ansalar gaped at him. She thought about Ashlaik and Cyraenie, who'd been her friends, even though she didn't make friends easily. She thought about Professor Laryan, who'd been so kind and considerate toward her as a new member of his staff. She thought about the girl, Finn, and the Doctor, and what they were trying to do.

And she thought about herself. What kind of person she'd become. Having to live with what she'd been ordered to do, for the rest of her life. What kind of person she'd be, if she continued to do what he said.

And it wasn't to be borne.

It would stop here. Now. The killing, the lying, the guilt. All of it.

"No," she said, in such a low voice that for an instant Zarramin wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"I said, no," Ansalar repeated. She drew herself erect, looking down at him from her superior height. "I won't do it."

She saw the look in his eyes and knew she ought to be afraid. But somehow, whatever followed, she was glad she'd said it. Glad she'd refused.

"I won't do your dirty work for you any more," she said. "I don't care what you do. Those are good people. They're not thinking about themselves. They're thinking about what's good for everyone else, not what's good for them. And I'm not going to kill them just so you can line your own pockets. All I wanted was to leave my mistakes behind me. And all you've done for me is make me repeat them. I wanted to be somebody else, somebody better. You've just kept making me into what I was before, only worse. Well, I'm not going to be that person! I'm going to do what I think is right. Even if it's the last thing I do."

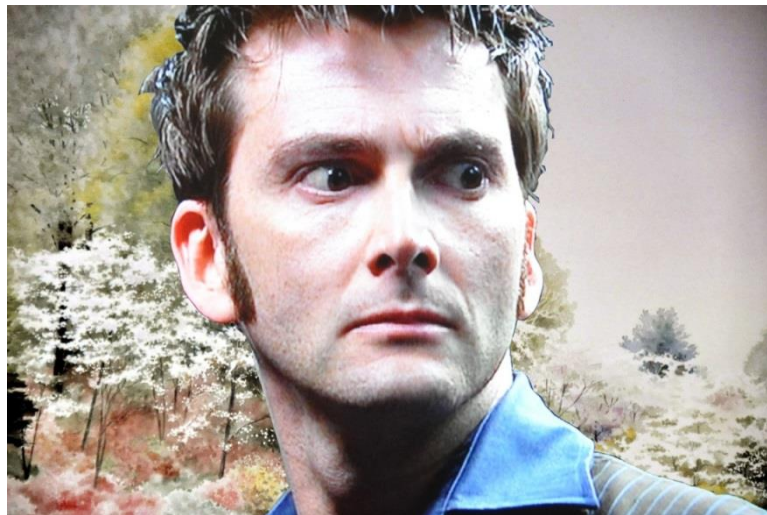
"As indeed it will be," Zarramin assured her, with a snarl.

There was a sharp crack and a momentary flash of light, as the projectile travelled from the weapon that had suddenly appeared in his hand to her chest, penetrating her heart.

After the initial jerk of her body, she stood motionless for a moment, an unaccountable look of triumph on her face, as if somehow she'd beaten him. Then she collapsed to the floor without a sound.

Zarramin stood staring down at her for a moment. But he found that for some reason he couldn't bear that look of triumph in her newly dead eyes, in the smile frozen on her lips.

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the apartment.



## **Chapter 21**

### ***Felindre in Danger***

True to his word, the Doctor, with rapid-fire delivery, had revealed the identity and the motive of Ghyron's murderer – murderers, if one counted Ansalar – to Laryan and Finn as he led them out of the Laboratory Block and across the grounds to the boundary with the forest. They didn't say much; there wasn't much to say. But, despite the distaste on Laryan's face in response to what he'd learned, he was clearly relieved that the mystery surrounding Ghyron, at least, had been resolved. Now he was fully focused on the remaining issue.

"What's your plan, Doctor?" he asked, as they approached the boundary.

"I'm going to get Finn to ask her Nithlon friend to come here," said the Doctor briskly. "If she can give me a link to Felindre itself, I can talk to it. Well, to her, I suppose I should be saying."

"My previous question still stands, then," said Laryan. "What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I've got a suggestion up my sleeve," the Doctor assured him, with twinkling eyes. "It'll be interesting to see what she thinks of it..."

He came to a halt in front of the boundary fence, and turned to Finn.

"Right," he said. "You need to call that Nithlon, somehow. Get her here."

"How?" she asked, at something of a loss.

"Shut your eyes and think of her," the Doctor said urgently. "Concentrate on her. Picture her in your mind. And call her here."

Finn looked at him dubiously. *Oh, well – there's a first time for everything*, she thought to herself. *Even something like this!* She swallowed, and fixed her gaze on the forest beyond the boundary. Then she closed her eyes, as the Doctor had suggested, and began to build the best picture in her mind that she could, from her memories of the Nithlon staring into her eyes, the beautiful wings, the soaring flight, the words of their conversation.

*Where are you? Are you there? I need to speak to you! Come to me, please!*

She pictured her words flying away from her, spreading out in all directions across the forest, seeking their quarry.

*Please answer me! Felindre is in terrible danger! We need your help! Please come to me!*

She was on the point of giving up, when she felt the slightest tremor of response at the edge of her mind.

*Is it you? Are you coming?*

*Felindre! I hear you – I am coming, my friend Finn!*

She gasped with relief, and opened her eyes, to see the Doctor smiling – of course, he'd been able to hear the Nithlon – and Laryan regarding her with an expectant expression.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Would've been easier if she'd had a mobile phone, admittedly," Finn said lightly, "but, yes – she's on her way."

"You couldn't hear her at all?" the Doctor asked Laryan, who shook his head.

"If this works, we're going to have to find a way round that," the Doctor commented.

At that moment his communicator beeped at him imperatively, and he seized it. Laryan moved away slightly and operated his own communicator, speaking into it urgently in a low voice, so Finn couldn't hear who he was talking to.

"Cyraenie? That you? Got that figure for me?" the Doctor demanded.

"Yes, Doctor." Finn could hear her voice clearly. "But you aren't going to like it... According to the Array, the leading edge of the storm is only twelve hours away."

"How long?" Finn demanded incredulously. Cyraenie heard her.

"I know, but it's speeding up, the closer it gets. I don't understand why..."

"Right at this moment, fascinating though the explanation might be, don't need to understand why," the Doctor cut in. "The only fact of importance is that we've got twelve hours to save Felindre and her children. Keep monitoring the storm, Cyraenie – if that estimate changes, it's essential I know about it at once, right?"

He shut the communicator off, and turned back to the forest, scanning it with urgent eyes.

"Did I hear correctly? *Twelve* hours?" Laryan asked, putting away his communicator. The Doctor nodded grimly.

"I only hope it's enough time," he muttered.

Finn closed her eyes again, and sent her thought anxiously out to the Nithlon.

*Are you coming? How long will you be?*

*Felindre!* came the response. *I am near! I come, my friend Finn!*

"She says she's almost here," Finn reported.

"Not 'almost'," the Doctor corrected her. "There she is!"

Finn and Laryan followed his pointing finger. Outlined in the sky, skimming over the tops of the trees, the Nithlon was speeding towards them, dropping down to come to a hovering halt in front of Finn. Laryan stared at the fantastic, beautiful creature, transfixed.

"*Felindre?*" the Nithlon asked. *I have come. What is your need, my friend Finn?*

"We need to talk to Felindre," said the Doctor. "We need your help. There's terrible danger coming."

"*Felindre,*" the Nithlon assured him, hovering delicately some four feet or so above the ground. *Felindre knows this.*

"I know she does, but there's something she might be able to do about it," the Doctor said rapidly. "If you can help us talk to her, we might be able to stop it happening."

“Oh, I don’t think so, Doctor,” said a voice from behind them.

They turned to see Zarramin emerging from a tangle of bushes a few yards away, his projectile weapon covering them. He cast one dismissive look at the hovering Nithlon, then ignored it completely, focusing on the three of them.

“Stop a spatial storm? You seem to be inordinately clever, but I think that’s beyond even you,” he commented. “However, I’m not prepared to run the risk that you might exceed my expectations in that regard.”

“What’s the matter? Not got Ansalar to do your dirty work for you this time?” challenged the Doctor.

“I’m afraid Six Four Eight Ansalar is no longer a member of the Complex staff,” said Zarramin, almost as if he genuinely regretted that. “She refused to take further direction, so I was forced to dispense with her services. Permanently, I fear. Such a pity. But don’t think I’m not capable of performing any action I deem necessary, Doctor.”

“Oh, never thought that for a moment,” the Doctor assured him, watching him carefully. “You’re just the type who prefers other people to get their hands dirty on your behalf. So Ansalar refused, did she? Had an attack of conscience, I presume. Which was never going to go down well with you, was it? So what are you going to do?”

“Oh, I shall kill all of you,” said Zarramin calmly. “And the other two. Where are they, by the way? Still in the lab, I suppose? Won’t matter. It’ll turn out that one of you went mad and shot them and the other two here, then took your own life. Haven’t quite decided which of you that’s going to be, yet. However, as I say – doesn’t matter. But afterwards, all will be as it was before. And my deal with the mining corporations will still go through, as originally planned.”

Finn stared at him with mounting fear. He was too far away for either the Doctor or Laryan to reach him before he could fire his weapon. And the Doctor would never be able to get his sonic screwdriver out in time to stop Zarramin firing. One of them, at least, was likely to die. And it would most likely be the Doctor – he was, after all, the one most likely to act.

*“Felindre!” You are afraid! This man threatens you?* she suddenly heard the Nithlon ask, an unaccustomed tension in its mental tone.

“Yes!” Finn gasped. Laryan and Zarramin looked at her without understanding at first, but realization dawned in different ways on both their faces as she went on speaking to the Nithlon; the Doctor, of course, already understood. “He’s going to kill us, so we can’t help save Felindre!”

The Nithlon instantly rose higher into the air and stayed poised there, as if she was about to swoop down on Zarramin, her black eyes compressed into angry slits. Instinctively he followed her with the weapon, keeping it trained on her.

“Tell that thing that if it tries anything, I’ll kill it!” he snapped, tensely.

*“Felindre!” You are wicked! You must not threaten my friends!*

Zarramin never noticed the sudden widening of everyone’s eyes as his finger tightened on the trigger, the barrel still pointing at the Nithlon. After which he was in no condition to notice anything for quite a while, as something made hard and heavy contact with the side of his head, and he dropped as if he’d been poleaxed.

Which was a pretty fair description of what had happened, in fact.

## **Chapter 22**

### ***Talking to the World***

“Professor Ehrath!” Finn gasped.

Ehrath slowly lowered the lump of stone with which he had hit Zarramin, then let it fall to the turf with a muffled thump. His eyes were fixed on the Nithlon like a man in love.

“What are you doing here?” the Doctor followed up.

“Laryan told me she was coming,” Ehrath said in a hushed tone, his eyes not moving from the beautiful creature hovering above them. “I had to see her. And that – that” – he gestured at the limp body of the fallen

Administrator, striving for a sufficiently vitriolic epithet – “that *Philistine* was going to *shoot* her! Something so – unique! So beautiful...” His voice trailed away, and then his eyes widened, as the Nithlon flew closer to him, and smiled at him.

“She says thank you,” the Doctor told him. “For saving her, and saving her friends.”

Ehrath’s heart was evidently too full for a coherent reply; he merely blinked, and smiled back.

“And so do I... But, meanwhile” – the Doctor’s manner changed abruptly – “back to the business of saving the planet!”

He whirled away, and the Nithlon followed him, resuming her station by Finn. The Doctor looked at both of them.

“Now, listen, you two,” he said, briskly. “I need to speak to Felindre herself. Finn, you can hear her. But I need *her* to hear *me*. So I need to make a communication chain – me to you” – he pointed from himself to Finn – “you to *you*” – from Finn to the Nithlon – “and *you* to Felindre. So what I say goes through Finn and you to Felindre, and what she says comes back the same way. Understand?”

“*Felindre.*” *I understand*, the Nithlon confirmed. Finn nodded her agreement.

“Right then,” said the Doctor, taking a deep breath. “Here goes!”

Laryan and Ehrath watched with fascination as the Doctor placed his hands on both sides of Finn’s head; both closed their eyes. The Nithlon ceased to hover, and delicately landed on the grass; her eyes did not close, but never left Finn’s face. Even so, Laryan had a sense that their focus was elsewhere, turned inwards, not outwards.

Suddenly both Finn and the Doctor staggered as if something had impacted on them, though the Doctor’s hands stayed locked in their position against the girl’s temples.

“Are you all right?” Laryan demanded, looking at the stress and pain written on their faces.

“Yeah...” the Doctor replied, with difficulty, his eyes still closed, his teeth clenched. “Made contact... Just that – a planet’s mind – is a big thing – pretty overpowering... Don’t worry – getting used to it...”

The Nithlon had reached out one of its three-fingered forelimbs and rested it on Finn’s shoulder. After a few moments, things seemed to be getting easier. The strain on the faces of the Doctor and Finn relaxed somewhat. Laryan wondered what it could possibly be like, what they were attempting. What they were *doing*! For now the Doctor was muttering, as if vocalizing was helping him send his thoughts to the immense consciousness he was trying to communicate with. But his voice was too low for Laryan to hear what he was saying.

It seemed to go on a long time – the Doctor murmuring, the ensuing pauses in which, presumably, the planet was replying. The strain on Finn seemed to be getting greater, the longer it went on; she was now very pale, and there were beads of perspiration on her forehead. Laryan hoped the Doctor was remembering she’d already been under considerable emotional and physical pressure in the very recent past...

At last the Doctor smiled, and said one last word, quite clearly.

“Brilliant...!”

He opened his eyes and let his hands drop from Finn’s head. She staggered again, and would have folded to the ground had the Doctor’s lightning quick reactions not allowed him to catch her before she went down. He lowered her gently while kneeling himself, cradling her against him.

“Is she all right?” Laryan demanded, hurrying forward, Ehrath in his wake.

“*Felindre?*” *Is all well with my friend Finn?* the Nithlon asked, fluttering agitatedly above them.

“She’ll be all right,” the Doctor assured them, studying her intently. “I think it was just a bit – overwhelming for her. Talking to a planet – takes it out of you a bit, you know.”

“Are you sure? She’s been close to death twice in the space of a few hours already. How much do you think she can take?” Laryan challenged, quite angrily, for him.

The Doctor looked up at him quickly, then back down to the face of the unconscious girl, his own expression tinged with surprise and, perhaps, a little guilt. He watched the rolling of her eyes under her eyelids, the fluttering of her eyelashes as she fought her way back to the rest of them.

“Sometimes I forget she’s only human,” he admitted in a low voice, talking to himself rather than Laryan. Then he looked up again, his face normal. “Don’t worry – she *will* be all right. I promise you.”

Laryan nodded severely, and regarded the Doctor for a few moments longer. Then he straightened up and looked at Ehrath. The expression on his colleague's face made it impossible for him to suppress a smile.

"So – how's your world view now, Ehrath?" he asked, unable to resist the tease.

Ehrath smiled back, and looked at the Nithlon, still hovering over Finn.

"Vastly enlarged from what it was," he said, happily. "Vastly."

"Sorry to break in on this, but I need you to do something," said the Doctor, looking up at them both. "Get a warning issued to everyone. Something's about to happen, and they need to know about it."

"Danger?" Laryan asked.

"Not to us," said the Doctor. "But something pretty startling. And it'll be happening all over the planet. So everyone'll be affected. And on the moons. They'll see it, too. So they need to be warned. You need to get Helenay on the case. Tell them something spectacular'll be happening, but they're quite safe. No need to panic."

"What is it?" Ehrath asked.

"Something that, if it works, will save Felindre and her children," said the Doctor gravely. "And it's her only chance. So let's hope it does work. Oh, and you'd better get someone to cart the former Planetary Administrator off to your sick bay. Under arrest, preferably." He looked at the supine form still lying on the grass where it had fallen, and smiled briefly. "That's quite a decent swing you've got there, Professor Ehrath."

Ehrath's face creased into a wide smile.

"I'll see to it," he promised. "Laryan, you'll arrange for the warning?"

Laryan nodded.

"How long have we got?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, could be any time. Better be safe than sorry," the Doctor advised him.

"What about Finn?"

The Doctor looked down at her again.

"I'll look after her," he said. "I promised Jack I would..."

Laryan had no idea who Jack was, but he recognized a vow when he heard one. He nodded, and headed back towards the Complex, Ehrath alongside him.

Left alone with the Nithlon, the Doctor continued to cradle Finn, rocking her slightly.

*"Felindre." Do not worry, my friend Doctor. She will be all right,* the creature assured him.

The Doctor looked up at her, his eyes dark and troubled.

"I promised I'd look after her," he said. "I'm making a pretty rotten job of it, at the moment."

*"Felindre." I have looked into her mind. She would prefer to be in danger with you than safe without you.*

The Doctor's face creased in an expression of agonized indecision.

"But do I have the right to do that to her?" He forced the words out between clenched teeth. "She's already had so much grief in her life. What right do I have to ask her to risk more?"

*"Felindre." You are her friend. You have the right to ask. She is your friend. She has the right to refuse. She does not choose to refuse. She chooses to accompany you. Because it is her wish. I have seen this in her mind. Do not be distressed, my friend Doctor. My friend Finn wishes to be of help to you. She wishes to be of help to Felindre. As you do. You should not be distressed. Please do not be distressed.*

The Doctor hurriedly wiped one corner of his eye with the heel of his palm, then smiled at the Nithlon.

"Thank you," he said.

Finn stirred more definitely in his arms, and her eyes slowly opened fully. She was back with him. He smiled down at her.

"Sleeping on the job again," he said severely, pretending to scold her. She blinked uncertainly and immediately struggled to sit upright, hands going to her head. He kept an arm round her shoulders to support her; she was evidently still rather dizzy.

"Woh! That was..." She struggled to find the right word, awestruck. She met the Doctor's eyes with both confusion and excitement. "That was *incredible*...!"

“Wasn’t it just?” the Doctor agreed happily. “Fionnula Thornton, telephone line for the entire planet! Bet you didn’t think you’d be doing *that* when you got up this morning!”

“Predicting how the day’s going to turn out when travelling with you is a pretty pointless exercise, I’d’ve thought,” Finn told him, probing her temples with cautious fingertips.

“Yeah, well – you were brilliant,” he assured her.

“So it worked, then? She’s going to do it?”

“Any minute now, I should imagine. I mean, I don’t know how long it takes to rev up to something like that, but she won’t be hanging about,” said the Doctor.

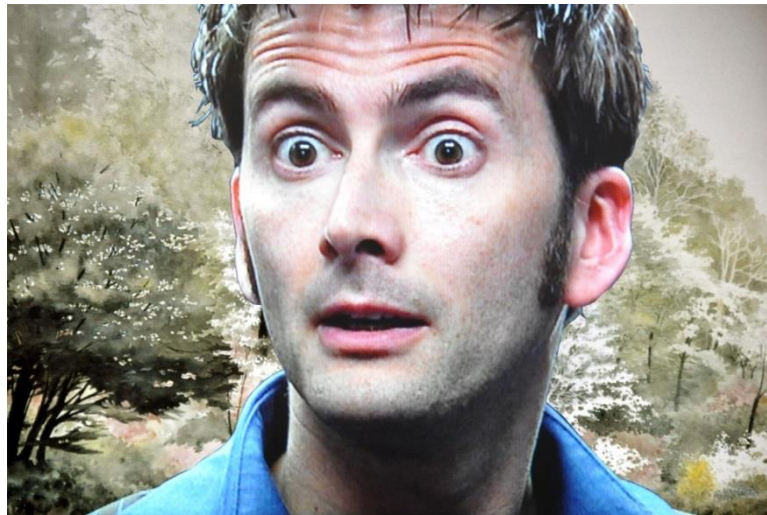
“*Felindre.*” *All of us now know*, the Nithlon informed them. *All of us who are part of Felindre. She has warned us. Now she will act. Prepare yourselves!*

“Come on, up you get,” the Doctor encouraged Finn, helping her to her feet. “You’re going to want to see it, now you’ve helped it to happen, aren’t you?”

She awarded him an old-fashioned look, then glanced up at the sky. Her eyes widened.

“Doctor, look!” she said, pointing. “It’s started! She’s doing it! Oh, *wow...*!”

She fell silent – there just weren’t the words – and they stood together, looking upwards, hands clasped.



## Chapter 23

### *The Cage*

Long, slender, gold-coloured tendrils were rising from the forest into the sky. Hundreds of them. They swayed like waterweeds responding to the flow of a river, like the tentacles of anemones washed by an ocean current, and sparkled like glitter. More and more of them, growing and thickening, flowing into the sky, away and out beyond the range of human vision.

The Doctor’s communicator sounded, and he fished it out of his pocket, still gazing at the incredible spectacle.

“Doctor, can you see it?” Cyraenie’s voice demanded.

“See it? *I organized it!*” the Doctor told her triumphantly.

“But what is it? What’s happening?”

“It’s tascenium,” said the Doctor. “All the tascenium in Felindre. On its way to save the planet.”

“*How?*”

“Tell me, can you get the Array to give us a long range picture of the area of space between us and the storm?” the Doctor asked, not answering the question.

“Yes, of course.”

"Then get it on screen," he directed her. "We're on our way up." He shut off the communicator and pulled at Finn's hand. "Come on. This is something else you'll want to see. Do you want to come with us?" he asked, turning to the Nithlon. "We're going inside. Perhaps you can show Felindre what's happening, through your eyes?"

The Nithlon bobbed up and down.

*"Felindre." I will come.*

"Yeah, well – be prepared to get noticed," the Doctor warned her. "You Nithlons are a bit of a legend, I hear. You're bound to get stared at. By them." He gestured in the direction of the Complex, where the staff were beginning to pour out of the buildings as word spread of the incredible phenomenon taking place in the skies of Felindre.

*"Felindre." I will come,* the creature repeated. Then, with a touch of sly amusement in its tone, it added, *"Felindre?" Beauty should be appreciated by all, should it not?*

The Doctor laughed aloud.

"Yes, it should!" he confirmed, happily. "And you are most definitely one of the most beautiful things ever! Come on, then!" Hand in hand with Finn, he began to run back to the Complex, ignoring the astonished looks of everyone they passed as their attention was temporarily diverted from the spectacle of the tascenium to the sight of a real live Nithlon flying overhead.

As they ran, Finn caught momentary sight of someone among the flow of people exiting the Complex buildings.

What caught her attention, fleeting as her view of him was, was that, unlike everyone else, he wasn't running.

He was standing completely still, while other people ran past him. He had an aura of untouchability about him, as though his reality was somehow different from theirs. He was a slightly-built man of medium height, perhaps in his mid-fifties, with slightly curling brown hair above a pleasant but perhaps not very remarkable face – not until she noticed his eyes. And he was looking at her. Right at her, with a smile on his lips.

A warm smile. A smile of approval. As if he was pleased with her, approved her, for some reason.

She had the strangest sensation that, for a fleeting moment, time had slowed down, that everyone and everything was moving in slow motion, giving her the time to see him in such detail, for both of them to study each other. But perhaps it was just an illusion, the same as everything seeming to snap back to normal speed. She only glimpsed him for a split second, before she lost sight of him behind other people as the Doctor pulled her onward. If something had really affected time, wouldn't the Doctor have noticed? And clearly he hadn't. And when she tried to look back and see the man again, he was no longer there. He'd completely vanished.

Who was he? Why had he been interested in *her*? Why had it given her such a strange feeling to see him – a sense of timelessness, as though he was both here and not here...?

She had no further time to think about it as the Doctor charged into the Laboratory block, only pausing long enough to make sure the Nithlon was able to follow them through the doors before racing on to the Astrogeology lab.

Had she had the leisure, Finn would have treasured the way Cyraenie's and Ashlaik's jaws dropped in unison as the Nithlon followed her and the Doctor into the lab.

"What –?" Ashlaik began, but the Doctor cut across him.

"No time!" he snapped. "Cyraenie, where's that long-range view? Can you holograph it up?"

"Er – yes..." Cyraenie was understandably struggling to cope with everything that was happening, but she pulled herself together, and bent to the task. As she was doing so, the door was flung open again and Laryan came hastening in. He stopped and blinked at the sight of the Nithlon, then came to join the group around Cyraenie's computer.

"That – is – just about the most incredible sight I have ever seen," he told the Doctor, with admiration. "Tascenium, I assume?"

"And probably any other metal she's got in her, I should imagine," the Doctor agreed. "All grist to the mill, in the circumstances."



“But what’s she doing with it?”

“That,” said the Doctor, pointing as Cyraenie’s hologram sprang into life in front of them, filling almost one half of the entire lab.

It was as if they, as spectators, were poised in space somewhere just behind the planet and its moons. Far away, but visible, the spatial storm was travelling toward them, its vast mantle spread throughout space, ready to encompass Felindre and her children as it swept unknowingly, unconsciously, along its predetermined path. But from Felindre, glittering streams were flowing out in all directions, like the beams of light in a plasma globe.

“What’s happening?” Ashlaik breathed.

“Watch,” the Doctor told him.

The glistening tendrils, now reaching thousands of miles out into space, out beyond the orbits of the moons, all stopped growing in length at the same moment. Instead, as if they were indeed confined by an invisible globe, they began to turn and flow sideways. But not randomly; they were extending along predetermined paths, forming a recognizable network.

“A lattice!” Cyraenie exclaimed. “They’re weaving a lattice! But what are those things?”

“Tascenium,” said the Doctor. “Every molecule of tascenium at Felindre’s disposal. Plus every other metal she can lay her – well, let’s say ‘hands’ on, shall we? Not that she’s exactly got hands, in the usual sense, of course. Planets aren’t known for their hands, as a rule...” He caught Finn’s eye, urging him to get back to the point. “But she’s using whatever her personal equivalent is,” he went on. “Liquefying all that metal and shooting it as far out as she can get it so she can form a protective shield around herself and her children.”

Finn stared at the unfolding phenomenon with awe.

“But how’s that going to protect her?” she asked.

“Oh, come on, Finn,” said the Doctor, a touch impatiently, as if he was expecting better of her. “That’s an *electrical* storm coming! Where’s the safest place in a thunderstorm?”

Finn’s mouth dropped open in realization.

“A Faraday cage!” she said, her face lighting up. “She’s building a huge Faraday cage! Around *her*, around *them*!”

The Doctor grinned triumphantly.

“But will it be enough?” Laryan asked anxiously. “That’s a big area she’s trying to cover. And she must only have so much metal in her. Will it be thick enough?”

“Maybe not for total protection,” the Doctor admitted, his face falling slightly. “But enough to fend off the worst. I think.” Which didn’t come out quite as encouragingly as probably he wanted it to.

“Let’s hope so,” Laryan muttered.

“Why do you think it might not?” Finn asked.

“Metals with high conductivity provide the best protection,” Laryan explained. “And happily tascenium has one of the highest levels of conductivity of any metal in the universe. But if the Doctor’s right, she’s having to use an alloy, rather than pure tascenium. Adding other metals with lower conductivity. It might dilute the effectiveness of the cage. More than might be safe.”

The Nithlon, which had been staring at the display in front of it in silence thus far, suddenly performed a kind of shuffle so she could turn to look directly at him.

“*Felindre*,” she said. *Tell your friend that Felindre is grateful to my friend the Doctor for his idea. Without it, Felindre would certainly be doomed. Now there is at least a chance.*

The Doctor glanced at her and then away again, quickly, leaving Finn to translate the message for Laryan, who in turn smiled ruefully.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said to the Nithlon. “It’s just that I want it to be more than a chance. I want Felindre to survive.”

Finn listened to the reply, then told him, “She says, thank you – so does she!”

That raised a general smile.

“How long before the storm makes contact, Cyraenie?” asked the Doctor. Cyraenie consulted her screen.

“About thirty minutes before the leading edge will intersect with the cage,” she told him.

“Time for the Professor to do his stuff, then,” observed the Doctor casually. Laryan looked at him, quickly.

“What ‘stuff?’” he enquired.

“Well, you’ve still got a lot of people running around like headless chickens out there,” said the Doctor.

“Be a kindness to give them a bit of an explanation before the fireworks display, don’t you think?”

“*Felindre?*” *What are fireworks?* asked the Nithlon.

“Something humans use to entertain themselves with, usually,” the Doctor told her. “Sparks and explosions, all colours and noise and lights and smoke. Much the same thing’s going to happen when the storm hits the metals in the cage. Spectacular bangs and flashes. Does Felindre know that’s what’ll happen? Don’t want all the soobits falling out of the trees because nobody warned ‘em!”

“*Felindre.*” *I will make sure Felindre knows,* the Nithlon assured him, rather hurriedly.

“Well, go on, Laryan!” the Doctor exhorted, noticing that Laryan was still there. “I know it’s usually the sort of announcement that the Planetary Administrator would have made, but I rather think that post’s vacant at the moment. So someone’s got to step into the breach for the duration. And you know more about it than anyone. Except me, of course... So, off you trot! Let everyone know what’s going on. Then make sure you’ve got a good seat for the show. Likely to be quite an extravaganza, wouldn’t you say? And Helenay’ll be in your debt forever, I should think – bet her phone’s ringing off the hook right now!”

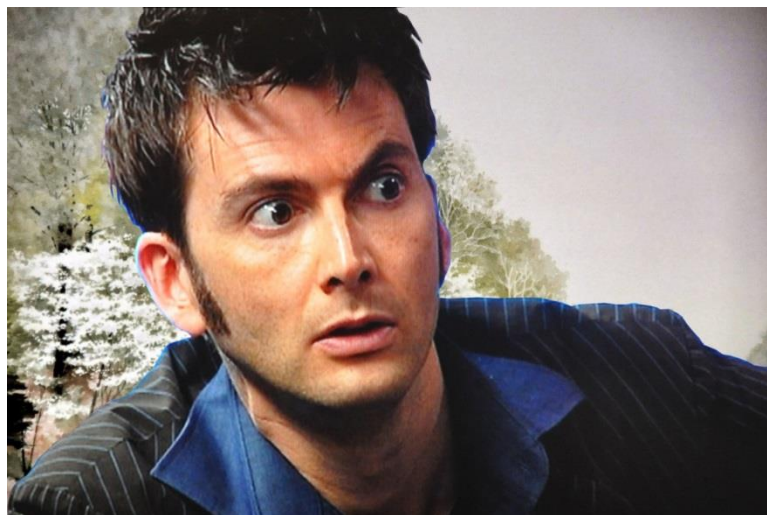
“I’m not sure I entirely understand the allusion, but I think I understand the general tenor,” Laryan said. “Very well – I suppose I *am* the logical candidate...” He nodded, and strode toward the lab door, then hesitated on the point of leaving. “What do I tell Helenay about Zarramin?”

“Tell her the truth,” the Doctor advised him. “She won’t exactly be chuffed that he tried to implicate her in his little plan. I’ll tell you, Laryan, bet there won’t be anything you won’t be able to do around here if Helenay’s on your side!”

“Even so – wish me luck!” Laryan said. “It’s quite a story I’ve got to tell her!” He left.

“And it’s not over – not just yet,” murmured the Doctor, so low that nobody but Finn heard him.

Together, Ashlaik and Cyraenie silent alongside them, they continued to watch the inexorable approach of the storm as it closed in on Felindre’s valiant, protective shield.



## **Chapter 24**

### ***In the Storm Zone***

When Laryan reached Helenay’s office, he found her confronting Ehrath, wearing her most formidable face. Realizing who had arrived, Ehrath’s expression changed from harassment to relief.

“Laryan! Please explain to her what’s going on,” he pleaded. “I can’t seem to convince her...”

“Yes, Professor!” Helenay agreed. “Please be kind enough to tell me not only exactly what is happening outside, but also why Professor Ehrath has assaulted Administrator Zarramin so badly that he needs to be hospitalized, and in addition has had him *arrested*!”

Her eyes blazed with indignation, but Laryan was equal to her.

“Personal Assistant Helenay, you will do me the courtesy of taking my word for it that the entire planet is currently in the greatest danger,” he said, with an edge to his voice that made Helenay blink in astonishment. “I completely endorse both of Professor Ehrath’s actions with regard to the Planetary Administrator, and I will be most happy to explain why. In fact, if you will kindly give me planetary coverage to all staff, as I explain to them to what is happening, it will become very clear to you why I take that view. Kindly give me communications access to the Complex and to all five of the Observatories. *Now!*” he finished, with a most uncharacteristic roar of command, that almost made Helenay jump, while Ehrath regarded him with amused admiration.

“Very well, Professor,” Helenay blustered. “But I hope your explanation is going to be an extremely good one!”

“You’ll probably never hear its like again,” he assured her, as he got ready to deliver it to the whole of Felindre.

\*

“Ah,” said the Doctor a few minutes later, as Laryan’s voice began to broadcast throughout the Complex. “Good. He got past the gates of Fortress Helenay, then! Mind you, we don’t need to hear it. Old news. Can you turn it down in here?”

Cyraenie nodded, and obliged.

“How long now?” Ashlaik wondered.

“Oh, the longest twenty minutes of your life, I’d say,” the Doctor informed him.

Before Cyraenie could return to her seat, Finn got up and went over to whisper something in her ear. Cyraenie looked surprised, but nodded, and Finn followed her over to one of the other computers.

“What are you doing?” Ashlaik asked, curiously.

“Nothing to worry about,” Finn told him. “Just a bit of research. Sort of.”

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow in their direction, but didn’t remark upon the development. Cyraenie accessed the information Finn was after, then left her to scroll through the screens.

“What’s she got there?” the Doctor asked quietly, as Cyraenie returned to her chair.

“She wants to see the staff database,” she said, with a shrug.

“Does she?” The Doctor looked over at Finn, intrigued. “Wonder why? Bit of a strange time for a staff survey...” He reared up in his chair and peered across at the other screen, which seemed to be showing a collection of photographs, head-and-shoulders portraits that Finn was scanning very intently.

He tried to suppress his curiosity, but after a few minutes he got up and went to lean over Finn’s shoulder, watching the procession of faces scrolling up from the bottom of the screen.

“Who’re you looking for?” he enquired, shoving his glasses on to peer more closely.

“Hold on,” Finn told him absently. “Nearly finished...”

A few moments later she leaned back in her chair, a perplexed frown on her face.

“What?” asked the Doctor.

She told him about the man she’d seen outside, staring at her, and the strange feeling he’d given her.

“I thought I’d make some of the wait pass by finding out who he was,” she said. “But I’ve just been through all four hundred and seven staff ID photos. Everyone assigned to work on Felindre and her moons.” She looked at the Doctor, still frowning. “He’s not there.”

The Doctor matched her frown.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” she said flatly. “I’d know him instantly, if I saw him again.”

"I wonder who he is, then?" mused the Doctor. "How he got here. And why he was staring at *you*. He didn't frighten you?"

"No!" she denied, earnestly. "He's a friend. I know he is. A feeling, in here." She tapped her chest in the region of her heart. "But how can I know that? Why should I *feel* that? I've never even seen him before."

The Doctor regarded her thoughtfully.

"Maybe you'll see him again, though," he suggested quietly. "Have to wait and see..."

Finn suddenly thought of something, and turned to the Nithlon.

"Did you see the man we're talking about?" she asked.

*"Felindre." Yes, I saw him. He was not like you. He is not of Felindre.*

"But we're not of Felindre, either. What do you mean, he's not like us?" asked the Doctor.

*"Felindre." I cannot explain it. You are not of Felindre, but Felindre recognizes you. Felindre did not recognize him.*

"Do you know where he is? Can you find him for us?"

*"Felindre." He is no longer here. He is gone.* The Nithlon sounded almost apologetic.

"Gone? Gone where?"

*"Felindre." I know not. He is not on Felindre. He is gone.*

"So he *was* here, but now he's gone," the Doctor said, the frown returning to his face.

"Sounds just like you," Finn quipped.

*"Felindre." He was not like you,* the Nithlon interjected, repeating her earlier statement.

"Looks like we're going to have to hope he turns up again at some point," said the Doctor, intrigued. "Just as we solve one mystery, another one turns up. Story of my life!"

"Oh, good! I should hate you to be bored," Finn said, rather tartly.

"Doctor!" Cyraenie interrupted them. "Two minutes to convergence!"

"Right!" The Doctor whipped his glasses off and tucked them in his pocket as he turned his attention back to the vista the Panoptes Array was transmitting. "Can we zoom in a bit? See the fine detail?"

"How long are we going to be in the zone of the storm? I mean, how long will it take to flow past us?" Ashlaik wanted to know.

"Several hours, I'd say," the Doctor estimated. "Brace yourselves, everyone! Here it comes...!"

The storm looked like a gaseous silver-grey cloud, shot through with enormous bolts of lightning, some of which reached out beyond its edge into the space beyond. Each bolt was probably hundreds of miles long, licking out like silver serpents' tongues, illuminating the cloud or streaking out in jagged images against the black background of space. The longest ones were about to touch Felindre's shield...

Then the first one did. A spray of what seemed at this distance to be mere sparks erupted from the point where the tip of the bolt had made contact with the metal of the shield, and more raced out across the surface of the lattice with the motion of a wave across the sea. But Finn suspected that the size of those 'sparks' was probably more than she knew how to estimate. She couldn't begin to imagine the forces involved.

And this was just the beginning. Another tongue of electricity flicked out to touch the shield. Then another. The cloud itself was beginning to envelop the cage. Burst after burst of white light exploded, each detonation more spectacular than the last. The 'sparks' raced over the latticework of the cage in a continuous blanket.

Finn looked at the slender tendrils of tascenium with dismay. How could something so fragile-looking last for several hours under this kind of assault?

"Is it going to work, Doctor?" she couldn't help asking.

He looked grim.

"It's got to," he averred. "It's the only chance she's got." He looked at Finn. "She'll be putting her whole heart into it. That's her children she's protecting. That's why she'll succeed." He looked back at the hologram. "If she does."

"What's that noise?" Ashlaik asked, suddenly.

“Oh, it’ll probably get much louder,” the Doctor told him. “Even though those explosions are taking place thousands of miles away, they’ll get through to us at some point.”

“No, not that,” Ashlaik said, shaking his head. “That other noise. Like people shouting.” He got out of his chair. “I’m going to see.”

All of them, even the Doctor, followed him out into the corridor, the Nithlon in their wake, and looked through the window.

The first things to catch their attention were the huge, distant white flashes in the sky; the lattice of tascenium was too fine to be seen by the naked eye from the planet’s surface, but the flares of explosion as the electricity interacted with them were clearly visible. But their eyes were distracted from that by what was happening in the grounds, as most of the people who had not long ago streamed out of the building now ran back toward it, unnerved by the violence of the detonations and blindly obeying the instinct to seek cover in the face of danger, shouting or screaming in panic as they ran.

“Nothing we can do,” remarked the Doctor, watching them. “Either the cage’ll hold, or Felindre’ll die trying.” Cyraenie looked at him quickly in instinctive protest.

“Do you think she’ll do it?” she asked, pleading for reassurance.

The Doctor looked at her with sombre eyes for some moments. Then, unexpectedly, his face lit up in a smile. “You know, I’ve got a feeling she will,” he said.

## **Chapter 25**

### ***Not Nicking the Silver***

Finn grinned, watching the Doctor, his hands stuck deep in his pockets as he stared up at the sky, rocking back and forth on his soles and heels, looking extremely pleased with himself.

“I love being right,” he said smugly. “Don’t you love me being right? It’s brilliant being the one who’s always right.”

“Always?” she teased him.

“Well, I suppose there was that time when –” he started, then caught her eye, and pulled a face at her. “Always!” he repeated firmly. “Well, nearly always. Well, mostly always. Well, more or less always...” He trailed off, and went back to staring upwards.

Finn looked at the sky, too. It was almost back to its original, pristine blue, though as the sun neared the horizon the blue was beginning to pale and become tinged with pale lemon and pink. Only if she concentrated very hard, relying on her peripheral vision to spot them, could she now see the very last of the paling flashes as the occasional obdurate lightning bolt still reached back from the storm to lick at the tattered remains of Felindre’s protective shield.

“She did it,” she said softly. “She really did it.”

“Caring for those you love. Just about the most powerful motive there is,” the Doctor commented.

“How true.” Finn continued to stare upwards as she spoke, and she’d put no particular intonation into her voice, but the Doctor flicked her a momentary glance. Which brought something else into the scope of his peripheral vision.

“Hello,” he said, turning to check it out. “Here comes your friend.”

Finn looked round, to see the Nithlon approaching them with a endearingly odd little bobbing motion as she flew.

“Everything all right, then?” the Doctor greeted her.

“*Felindre.*” *All is well*, the Nithlon confirmed. *All is very well.*

“All? I’d’ve thought some of the radiation got through,” said the Doctor dubiously. “Felindre isn’t going to feel terribly well, for a bit. Nor are the kids. Are you sure everything’s all right?”

*“Felindre.” There will be some damage, but the harm is slight compared to what would have happened without your help. Felindre and all her children will soon be restored. Felindre is grateful to you.*

“Don’t mention it,” said the Doctor, trying to shrug it off. “Anyway, we’ll be going now. Leave you to get on with it.”

*“Felindre.” Felindre does not wish you to go. I do not wish you to go, my friend Doctor, my friend Finn. Can you not stay, and be Felindre’s voice to the humans who live on her?*

“Well, it’s lovely to be wanted, but – not really,” the Doctor said, tugging at the lobe of his right ear. “Though we ought to see if we can’t sort out the communication issue before we go. Isn’t there anyone else you think you could talk to?”

*“Felindre.” There is one with whom it may be possible... said the Nithlon thoughtfully. If you could summon that one here to me, I will see if this is so.*

“Absolutely!” the Doctor assured her with a flourish. “Who d’you want, then?”

At the Nithlon’s response, Finn and he looked at each other with raised eyebrows, then broke into smiles.

“Do you want to do it, or shall I?” the Doctor asked.

Finn gave him an old-fashioned look, and reached for her communicator with an exaggerated sigh.

“Oh, I’ll do it...!”

She fired up the device and waited for the answer.

“Oh, hi, it’s me – Finn,” she said. “Look, we need your help. We’re down by the boundary fence. Could you come out here a minute?”

Receiving an affirmative response, she deactivated the communicator. “Cargo in transit,” she observed lightly.

A couple of minutes later Cyraenie, Laryan and Ashlaik came into view, coming towards them.

“Ah, you’ve all come,” said the Doctor happily. “Good! See, we’re about to be on our way” – the various kinds of disappointment in their expressions was immediate, but he went on blithely – “but the Nithlon pointed out that leaves a gap in communications with Felindre. I take it you think that ought to be filled?”

“Most certainly,” Laryan confirmed. “But how? We’d need someone with the ability for telepathy.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” agreed the Doctor. “Luckily, she’s spotted someone she thinks might have the potential.”

Mystified, the three looked at each other, then at the Nithlon, who bobbed up and down, her beautiful wings blurs of colour.

Cyraenie was the first to see who the Doctor and Finn were looking at; her face began to light up with an incredulous smile. Laryan was the next to pick up on it, and he, too, started to smile.

It was only after several seconds had passed that Ashlaik realized that everyone was looking at him.

His mouth dropped open with astonishment.

“Me?” he choked.

“Think you might be in for a temporary change of career,” the Doctor told him. “Can’t have you swanning off checking bridge girders when you’re needed to talk to the planet. Being the interpreter for every scientist who wants a chat. They’ll all want a piece of that, you know! You’ll probably find Ehrath surgically attached, if you’re not careful!”

“But – are you – is she *sure*?” Ashlaik was gasping, as if someone had punched him in the gut.

“She’s going to check it out now. She says to stand quite still,” said the Doctor.

Everyone else watched as the Nithlon landed nimbly in front of the dumbfounded young engineer. As she had done with Finn, she reached out one of her delicate three-fingered hands and laid it against his cheek, staring with almost hypnotic intensity into his widened eyes. Slowly, Ashlaik raised his own hand and rested his fingertips on the round, pale brown orb of the Nithlon’s face.

For some seconds, the watchers barely dared breathe, let alone speak. Then the Nithlon lowered her hand, and so did Ashlaik.

Finn found she couldn’t bear the suspense a moment longer.

“Did it work?” she burst out.

The Nithlon executed a little leap that brought her round to face Finn, and the tiny mouth and the eyes were each creased into slits of happiness.

*“Felindre.” My friend Ashlaik and I can speak to each other. Through us, the humans can speak to Felindre. Is that not so, my friend Ashlaik?*

Ashlaik’s face was a picture of wonder and awe. He put one hand to his head, very gently, as if frightened it would break.

“I can hear her,” he breathed. Then, louder, “I can hear her! In my head! Clear as day!” He turned to Cyraenie and the Professor, his face breaking into a huge smile. “I can hear her!”

Cyraenie put her arms round him and gave him a hug, while Laryan nodded with satisfaction.

“Then I think the Doctor is right,” he remarked. “You’ll be in great demand for quite a while, young man. Can’t waste your newly acquired talent. Engineers are ten a penny; men who can talk to planets aren’t! Cyraenie, I think you’d better take him inside and sit him down for a while. Let him get used to his new career path.”

Cyraenie nodded, and put an arm round Ashlaik’s shoulders, preparing to guide him back to the Complex. But first she paused, and looked at the Doctor and Finn.

“Thank you, both of you,” she said. “For finding out what happened to Ghyron. For saving Felindre. He’d have been so happy to know she’s saved.”

The Doctor nodded at her with smiling eyes, and Finn smiled likewise. But Cyraenie’s words made Ashlaik, too, realize they were leaving. He silently saluted the Doctor, then exchanged a long look with Finn, his eyes conveying everything that his full heart couldn’t allow him to say aloud. She nodded at him, to show she understood. *Thank you for everything*, she mouthed at him silently, and he smiled. Then he turned away, about to allow Cyraenie to escort him back toward the Complex and the changes that lay in his future there.

Except that the Nithlon stopped him, and he halted, taking Cyraenie by surprise.

“What is it?” she asked.

“She says, ‘Wait!’” Finn said.

“Wait for what?”

“She says you’ll want to see this.”

Laryan looked at Finn, then up into the evening sky.

“I rather think that’s what she has in mind,” he said, gesturing upwards.

Everyone turned to look.

Tenuous against the yellow and pink and blue colourwashed sky, the glittering tendrils of tascenium were returning to Felindre. Small and attenuated now, most of their mass destroyed in defence of the planet and her moons, but such of her resources as were left, Felindre was calling back to her. Glittering like dancing swarms of fireflies, what was left of the metals that had made up the shield around the world came flowing back.

“Makes sense,” the Doctor commented pragmatically. “It’s all part of the system, like everything else. She needs it back. Something to build on, add the replacements to. Wonder how long it’ll take her to do it? That’s something you could ask her, Ashlaik. Sometime. I’m sure the Professor here’ll want to know, even if no-one else does.”

Ashlaik smiled and nodded, and with one final wave of farewell, allowed Cyraenie to lead him away.

Laryan watched them go, then turned back to the Doctor.

“I was rather hoping you’d stay and help me explain this to the real Interplanetary Agency Investigator, when he or she turns up,” he said regretfully.

The Doctor arched his eyebrows in momentary surprise, then looked at Laryan quizzically.

“How long have you known?” he asked curiously.

“That you weren’t who you claimed to be? Oh, it didn’t take me long to realize that,” said Laryan.

“You never asked what we were doing in a prohibited area in the first place,” Finn observed. The Doctor shot her a slightly surprised look, but Laryan smiled.

"Ah, you noticed that, did you? Well, I didn't want to risk blowing your cover," he explained. "If other people started to think along those lines, who knows where it would've ended?"

"But *why* didn't you say anything?" the Doctor persisted, intrigued.

"Because it quickly became evident to me that whoever you were, wherever you came from, you were on the side of the angels, if I can put it like that."

"Oh, you can't always trust angels," said the Doctor, shaking his head sadly. "Weeping Angels, Host Angels... There're some very dodgy angels indeed out there."

"Somehow, I don't think you fall into that category," Laryan contradicted him gently. "And I want to thank you. For your integrity. And your courage." He looked at Finn. "You could so easily have lost your life, trying to help us. I don't know why you chose to do it, but – thank you."

Unexpectedly, he stepped forward and touched a brief kiss onto Finn's cheek, momentarily gripping her shoulder. Then he released her and extended his hand for the Doctor to shake.

"So – aren't you going to ask who we are?" the Doctor queried, that quizzical look back on his face.

"Does one ask for the name of a miracle?" Laryan countered, his eyes twinkling.

"*Professor!*" said Finn, pretending to be profoundly shocked, but unable to hide the amusement in her eyes. "And you a *scientist*...!"

He smiled back at her, then looked at the Doctor again.

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" he asked.

"No, we'll be fine," the Doctor assured him. "We'll just – you know – wander off..." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the forest behind them. "The Nithlon'll see us off the premises. Make sure we haven't nicked the silver, anything like that."

Laryan could tell by the way both of them quickly looked at the Nithlon that she'd said something. Then, together, they laughed.

"Am I allowed to share the joke?" he enquired mildly.

"She said she knows perfectly well we haven't taken the silver, because Felindre's got every bit of what's left," Finn chuckled. "She's giving me the impression that she counted it all out, and she counted it all back again!"

"You'd better warn Ashlaik she's got quite a dry sense of humour," the Doctor grinned.

"I will." Laryan treated them both to one more of his extremely charming smiles. "In fact, I'll do it now."

And with that, he turned and walked into Felindre's falling dusk, without looking back.

The Doctor and Finn watched him go.

"That is a quite remarkable man," said the Doctor slowly, with respect.

Finn threw him a glance.

"Takes one to know one," she said. "Now, are you going to walk me home before it gets too dark to see?"

"*Felindre.*" *Do not worry, my friend Finn, said the Nithlon, reaching out to lay her slender fingers on Finn's shoulder. Felindre is in your debt. Her children will shine on you from the skies. All of us who are Felindre will never forget you, my friend Finn, my friend Doctor. I am sorry you must leave, but I will make sure your final journey here is safe. And Felindre hopes that all your future journeys will be as safe.*

The Doctor and Finn looked at each other; they knew what the other was thinking. So accurately, in fact, that they both spoke at the same moment, to say the same thing.

"That'll be the day...!"

And burst out laughing.



## Chapter 26

### *The Present*

The TARDIS hung motionless out in intergalactic space. The Doctor had taken them far enough away to be able to see the whole Omaron Tegwith galaxy, glowing against its pure black background. Felindre and her moons could no longer be seen with the naked eye; they were just one of the myriad tiny points of light that merged together into the outermost spiral arm. The whole galaxy pulsed with colours: reds, blues, greens, yellows. It was an awesome sight.

Finn was sitting on the floor of the doorway, her back against the right-hand door, her right leg drawn up and her forearm resting on the knee. From the knee downward, her other leg was dangling out of the doorway, her foot swinging gently to and fro in space. The Doctor was sitting with his back to the other door, both knees drawn up to his chin, his hands clasped around his shins. They'd been sharing a companionable silence, just drinking in the beauty of the spectacle. But eventually Finn felt compelled to vocalize what she was thinking.

"Fantastic," she said, softly.

The Doctor rolled the back of his head against the wooden surface behind it so as to look at her.

"What?" he said, as if he hadn't quite caught what she'd said.

"Fantastic," she repeated, still staring at the majestically rotating galaxy. "These days it's come to mean – oh, I don't know – 'really good'. But originally it meant 'incredible'. 'Far-fetched'. 'Out of this world'. With you, most words seem to acquire new meanings. This one – well and truly back to basics. 'Fantastic'. It's all been – fantastic. In both senses." Then she gave him a slightly odd look, and double-tapped her head. "I'm getting one of your memories here. You used to say that a lot, didn't you? 'Fantastic.'" She smiled. "Now it's all 'brilliant', isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," he agreed, with a flourish. But for some reason, as he looked again at the place on the spiral arm where Felindre still circled her sun, he sighed.

"What are you thinking?" Finn asked.

"Oh, that sometimes humans are pretty wonderful, and then sometimes they let you down and remind you they're not," he said, sounding resigned.

She pretended to take umbrage.

"What do you mean? Of course we're wonderful!"

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Not all of you. What about Zarramin, then?" he asked.

Finn instantly cupped her hands round her mouth and catcalled, "Boo! Hiss!"

The Doctor laughed, then grew sober again.

"People like him seriously bring down the average," he said, sadly. "Self-serving, just focused on their own interests. Not interested in the bigger picture."

"Wonder what he'd make of this?" Finn commented, gesturing at the view. "Pictures don't come much bigger than that."

"He'd only see a lost fortune," said the Doctor sadly. "Felindre's fortune. He saw it as his."

Finn looked at him, one corner of her mouth quirked into a half-smile.

"Having *you* turn up at the right moment – *that* was Felindre's fortune," she remarked. "Anyway, cheer up – there's always people like Laryan and Cyraenie and Ashlaik to tip the balance the other way. As long as there are more people like them than like him, it'll be all right."

"More people like you," said the Doctor quietly, so quietly she hardly heard him.

For a split second, she didn't know the best way to react; he wasn't usually that forthcoming about his feelings. Then she flicked one forefinger against her forehead and away again in a quick salute, accepting the implied compliment without commenting on it, other than with the smile on her face.

The companionable silence fell again for a while after that, until another thought crossed Finn's mind, and she smiled whimsically.

"Wonder if Marvin the Paranoid Android would see Felindre as competition?" she wondered dreamily.

"Brain the size of a planet?" said the Doctor. "Probably. Wouldn't tell him, though. Might depress him."

"Oh, we wouldn't want that," Finn agreed, gravely. Then she looked at him, carefully. "Actually – talking of depression – *you* aren't looking as happy as I'd like. What's the matter?"

The Doctor was silent for a while.

"You. Being with me isn't safe," he said at last. "It never has been. Too many people have found that out. To their cost."

Finn looked at him quizzically.

"Is that supposed to be today's big news flash?" she enquired. She double-tapped her forehead. "Do you think I don't know that? And that it wasn't just their cost? It's been yours, as well, you know."

The Doctor looked at her, perplexed.

"Then why do you want to do it?" he asked. "Why run the risk?"

Finn studied him. It was blindingly clear to *her* why he wanted companionship in his travels, but it seemed that it was much less clear to him why she, knowing what she did, wanted to provide that companionship.

"Why do *you* do it?" she countered. "Why do you keep perambulating round in time and space, risking yourself for complete strangers? Why do you always want to see what's over the next hill?"

"Because they matter," he said, slowly. "And because – it might be wonderful."

"Well, there you have it – more or less all my reasons, in a nutshell," she said, with the air of a lawyer concluding her case.

He continued to stare at her, a troubled expression on his face, as if he still hadn't got it.

"Do I really need to spell it out for you?" she asked, slightly exasperated. "Look, before I met Sarah Jane, and then you, I'd never done anything in my life that could be described as even faintly exciting. I'm not the kind of person who goes looking for gratuitous thrills. Even after this little episode, I still have no desire to go on a rollercoaster ride, because I don't enjoy that tension, that knot-in-the-stomach sensation. Maybe if you allow me to cling to your coat-tails long enough, I *will* become an adrenalin junkie – working on it! – but I ain't there yet! So *why* do I want to run the risk of being with you? Which it is! A huge, great, whopping, gargantuan risk, and I know that, so this is an *informed* decision! And informed by *you*, more than anyone." She double-tapped her forehead again, emphatically. "Because *you* matter, too. And because you're right. I've learned that, in the little while I've known you. It is wonderful. And that's why."

She returned his gaze until she could see that he'd acknowledged her reasoning, and accepted her right to it; he dipped his head to her, without breaking eye contact. She gave him a single nod of her own, accompanied by one quirked eyebrow, as much as to say, *So that's that*, and returned her attention to the view outside the TARDIS. But when she looked back at him again, he was wearing the same troubled look as before.

"What is it now?" she demanded.

"Doesn't matter," he shrugged.

"Oi! Don't show me a face like that and then tell me it doesn't matter!" she contradicted. When he didn't reply, a possible explanation occurred to her. "You're not still worrying about how close I came in that freezer, are you?"

His eyes flicked to her face and then away again.

"Sort of..." he admitted, with a slight shrug.

"I thought we'd just been through this! So exactly what is the problem?" she persisted.

"Urgh!" he exclaimed, unexpectedly, throwing his hands in the air. "You humans! Why do I keep taking you lot around with me, when all you do is worry me to death?"

"Oh, come on! You know perfectly well why," she said composedly.

"Do I, really? Explain it to me, then," he invited, sarcastically. "Why I keep putting myself through emotional hoops like this."

"You know what they say – 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. Conversely, an experience shared is an experience doubled," she said, as if it should be obvious. "Whatever's going on – good or bad! – the dynamic's improved by sharing it with someone, rather than experiencing it alone. Talking to yourself isn't anything like as fulfilling as talking to someone else. Although you seem to do a fair bit of both! But having someone else around gives you someone you can say things like '*Isn't that beautiful*', or '*spectacular*', or '*wonderful*', or" – she cocked an amused eyebrow at him – "in your case, usually '*brilliant*' – to. That's why you have me, or my ilk, hanging round in the TARDIS. And quite right, too! What kind of a life would it be if you didn't have anyone around for moments like that?" she concluded, calmly.

"Yeah – well..." said the Doctor, grudgingly.

"And we renew it all for you," Finn went on. "All those places and things you showed me, before we came here. They were all places you already knew, things you'd already seen. So why did you bother? You know why? Because *I* hadn't seen them. And when you saw me reacting to how wonderful they were – as you knew I would! – it's like *your* first time, all over again. That's what someone like me – and all the others before me, and all the ones still to come – that's what we can do for you. Renew the good memories. Relive the good moments. Which *is* good!" she assured him, earnestly. "And for me, it's a way to say 'thank you' for what you've done for me."

"And what is it you think I've done for you?" the Doctor enquired, in a different tone.

Finn was silent for a few moments, looking at him. He genuinely seemed to want to know what she was thinking, why she felt as she did. Did he really not know? Was it one of those things that, being a Time Lord and not a human, he didn't get? Despite all the companions he'd had over the centuries?

"I can't speak for any of the others, but for me – given me back my appreciation for life," she said, simply. "What I lost – *who* I lost – completely derailed me. What I was going to do, who I was going to be. Knocked me back, for a long time. Made me *afraid* of life. Afraid to face all sorts of things. Because I'd learned that life *hurts*. I mean, it does in any case from time to time, but – too much, sometimes."

There was a short, painful pause.

"Eventually I tried to focus outwards, not inwards, but it's so hard to do when the primary support systems are gone. I mean, Gaerwyn and Carys did their best, but it's not the same," she went on. "But then I met Sarah Jane. That was the first step on the way back. I *had* to face up to things then. It kind of focuses your attention, having Slitheen hunting you... It made me realize I was capable of so much more than I'd been willing to do. That there *was* so much more! And then" – she looked at him quickly, then away again – "then there was you."

He held her gaze with his huge, dark eyes, but said nothing.

"Time Lord genius and adventurer," she went on. "Apparently quite happy to have me – *me!* – tagging at your heels while you charged off to save the Earth again. Do you have *any* idea how special that made me feel?" She leaned toward him, her gaze serious and earnest. "Someone who'd lost the courage to do so many ordinary things, things other people were doing without a second thought. But all of a sudden, I was *useful*. I was *special*. I had your mind in mine. And you trusted me to keep it! I wonder if I'll ever be able to get across to you how *that* makes me feel? How grateful I'm always going to be?"

"But you aren't mentioning the other things," said the Doctor. "The times you've been afraid. Terrified. Upset. In danger. When you might have died. Like today. Because of being with me."

"Look, you're the last person who needs telling. Someday, everybody dies," Finn said, gravely. There was a short silence. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled at him. "But some days – just some! – everybody lives! Remember, Doctor? That's something I know you've said yourself." She double-tapped her head. "All right, fear and danger are the price I've paid for being shown what life *can* be. But it's the price I'm willing to go *on* paying, if you're willing to go on giving me that choice. That's not the person I was a few years ago. Not even a few months ago. But I think – I hope – it's the person I am now. The person I've become. The person I hope I'll go on being. Thanks to you."

She looked at him and shrugged, almost as if she was saying there was nothing that could be done.

"*That's* what you've done for me," she concluded, simply.

The Doctor didn't say anything. As she'd known he wouldn't. But even though he wasn't looking at her now, still his eyes were giving him away. Time – for his sake! – to change the subject...

"So, then, Supergenius, now we've got that cleared up – what next?" she asked briskly. "The hero's plucky girl assistant needs instructions, since she *isn't* a genius. Is it time for you to take me home? Free you up for whatever you're doing to do after that?"

"I suppose so..." he said slowly. "Probably..."

Finn smiled at him, and gave her attention to the view once more, trying to engrave it on her memory; she knew she'd never be here, in this place, ever again, and it was a moment she wanted to preserve for retrieval in her future.

The future that she knew in her heart, one day, would no longer include the Doctor...

Although, at the moment, her concerns were a bit more immediate. He seemed unusually analytical, emotionally vulnerable, and it wasn't like him. He didn't usually discuss things the way he'd just been doing; he hid them away, didn't mention them. The questions he'd been asking her were quite out of keeping with his normal '*if-I-ignore-it-I-don't-have-to-talk-about-it*' approach. She wondered why, this time, it was different.

There was a short silence. Then the Doctor spoke again.

"Before we go, though – got a present for you," he said casually.

She looked at him with surprise.

"Well – thank you!" she said, not quite sure how to react. "What is it?"

The Doctor reached inside his breast pocket and pulled out a sonic screwdriver, hefted it in his hand for a moment, and then held it out toward her.

"That?" she said, not understanding. "But that's your –"

"No, it isn't," he interrupted firmly, gesturing with it so imperatively that she found herself taking it almost automatically. "It's *yours*. Here's mine." And he reached into his pocket a second time and pulled out the original.

Finn's eyes widened, dilated with something close to shock, as she looked at the sonic screwdriver he'd handed her. It wasn't quite the same as his, she realized. It was smaller, for one thing, apparently customized to fit the size of her hand; the casing was cream-coloured, and the cap at the end was not black, but a very dark brown. Everything else seemed to be exactly the same.

But...

The gift was tremendous. But so were the implications.

She looked him straight in the eye.

"Doctor," she said quietly. "Just 'thank you' can't even begin to cover this. But *why*? It's not something you'd do on a whim. Not a tool as powerful as this. *Why* are you giving it to me?"

He returned her look, and tried to sound casual.

"Because you might need it, one day. Like you did on Felindre. And I might not be there when you do," he said. "And I ..." He broke off, and started again. "I wouldn't want you to be without it, if that happened."

"Doctor," said Finn quietly, looking at him narrowly, as if she suspected something was somehow off-key, but didn't know what. "What are you telling me?"

He looked at her with wide-eyed innocence.

"Nothing," he said. "Just thought you might find it useful to have, that's all."

She didn't look entirely convinced – her eyes searched his face very intently for a few seconds – but she visibly decided to let it go. Then she looked at her sonic screwdriver with renewed awe.

"Then what can I say, except – thank you... And – look, I have no idea what I can do with this. Not yet. You'll have to show me. But one thing, Doctor." She looked him in the eye. "I promise not to do anything with it you wouldn't do."

He returned her look, and nodded.

There was a short silence; then the Doctor broke it.

"I've only ever given my sonic screwdriver to one other person," he said reflectively. "That is, I will do, someday."

"You already *have* – but you *will*...?" Finn's brow creased as she did her best to follow the logic.

"I mean I already know that someday I'll do that," the Doctor said. "Because I've already met her. Out of sequence, as it were. She already knew me, but I didn't know her. Then. But one day I will. Apparently."

Finn smiled slightly.

"You do lead a complicated life, don't you?" she said lightly. "Am I ever likely to run into this person?"

"No idea," the Doctor shrugged. "But if you do, she's called River Song."

"River Song," Finn repeated. "What a beautiful name."

"Yeah..." agreed the Doctor quietly.

"How did you meet her?"

"In a library. *The Library*. She kept teasing me about spoilers." The Doctor's eyes unfocused as he fell silent, reliving past memories.

Finn saw the sadness in those eyes, and said nothing for a while. Then, risking it being the right moment to break the mood, she spoke.

"Well, then," she said, in a different tone of voice. "This thing..." She gave the sonic screwdriver another long look, in which both trepidation and burgeoning enthusiasm were combined, then brandished it at him. "I think a briefing is in order, don't you? Instruction on the care and feeding of sonic screwdrivers. What all these settings do. I don't want the first thing I do with it to be accidentally disintegrating the colloidal bonds of all the cells of some perfect stranger at a party, or similar social gaffe!"

"Probably not," the Doctor agreed, perking up and matching her tone. "Although" – he qualified – "I think you could safely say that particular party would definitely end with a bang..."



## **Chapter 27**

### ***The Future***

With a final thump, the TARDIS finished materializing. The Doctor stepped out through the door into Finn's front room.

"There you are!" he said, triumphantly. "Home again. Safe and sound."

Behind him, Finn paused to touch the door gently and to call back, in the direction of the Time Rotor, "Thank you!", as she always did. Then she looked at him, with a smile. "And thank you, too." Then she went past him, taking off her jacket. She was about to throw it over a chair, but a thought struck her, and she began to energetically rummage in the pockets.

“Ah! There it is!” she said jubilantly after a few moments, and held up the pebble she’d found on the beach, back on Felindre. “My memento!”

This announcement produced an almost identical reaction in the Doctor, who suddenly exclaimed “Oooh!” and began digging round in his own pockets.

“Nearly forgot this,” he said, holding something out to her. “Another memento. Thought you might like it.”

“Ghyron’s soobit!” she exclaimed, looking at it with delight. “Thank you, I would!”

“I stuck it back into one piece,” the Doctor added, superfluously. “You liked the soobits, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she agreed. “Cuten’n’cuddly.” She grinned at him. “Thanks for thinking about it.” Then she looked at him more seriously. “So – you’ll be off, then. Got time for a cream soda before you go?”

The Doctor wrinkled his nose.

“Nah, not this time, thanks,” he said. “Got one or two things I want to do. Might as well get on and do them...”

Finn stepped forward and took his hand in hers.

“Then this is the right moment to say thank you, again,” she said. “For all the wonderful places you took me. All the wonderful things you showed me. And for letting me be useful in helping to save Felindre.”

“Let you?” The Doctor chortled. “I’d’ve had a job *stopping* you! Useful, Fionnula Thornton? You don’t know how to be anything else!”

“Dunno about that.” Finn looked slightly nervously at her new sonic screwdriver. “I could be about to start wreaking havoc!”

The Doctor shook his head, firmly.

“Never. That’s not what you do,” he said.

“You’d better come back and check, to make sure,” Finn suggested. “Soon!” She pulled a worried face at him, half-teasing, half in earnest.

“Don’t worry. I will,” he agreed, turning back into the TARDIS. “Soon.” And he closed the door, shutting off his view of her and the cheerful wave she was giving him.

He went back up the ramp, shrugging out of his trench coat and tossing it into the receiving branch of the customary pillar on his way to the console.

He’d keep his promise in a while. She’d be okay for a bit, now. She had all the memories of the places they’d been, the things they’d done, to blot out, or at least suppress, what had happened to them in the Mind Machine. Which was what this last trip had all been about. He’d zoom off and do some other stuff, and pop back a bit later. See how she was getting on with her gift.

And there was something else he should do. Find out who the mystery man on Felindre had been. The one he hadn’t seen, but Finn had... He’d go back and talk to her about that again, see what clues he could pick up. However, for now...

He paused by the console, considering. Where would he go first?

“I know!” he said aloud. “Mars! Haven’t been there for a while...”

He could try finding out what had happened to the ill-fated Beagle mission; if he did, there must be some way he could let Colin Pillinger know, without affecting the timeline. Although, maybe not – wouldn’t do to risk changing history! Maybe he’d try going forward in time a bit – say, about fifty years or so – and see if Spirit and Opportunity were still where they’d come to rest, in spite of the rigours of the Martian climate. It’d be nice to see what had become of them. He’d still got the spacesuit he’d acquired on Krop Tor – he could use that. And the first base on Mars would have been built and manned by then, of course – might be interesting to take a look at that, too...

“Yup – always something new to learn on Mars!” he murmured to himself, as the TARDIS launched itself through the Time Vortex.

Toward the future.

His future.

Mars...



## REFERENCES

Most Doctor Who fans won't need the various references in this story explained, but for the sake of newcomers to the Whoniverse, I have identified the source material where relevant (all episode references, followed by the year of the original broadcast by the BBC in the UK, refer to "Doctor Who" unless otherwise specified).

Author's note: "Felindre's Fortune" is the fourth of a story arc of seven stories about the Tenth Doctor and Finn Thornton. It was originally published by TheDoctorDeborah on the DoctorWho fan fiction website "A Teaspoon and an Open Mind" in July 2011 (see <http://www.whofic.com/viewuser.php?uid=12695>).

### Chapter 2: Intriguing Discoveries

- The Moomintroll children's novels were written by Swedish-Finnish author Tove Jansson from the mid 1940s to the 1970s.
- The encounter of the Doctor and Finn with the 'Mind Machine' and 'the Voice' is chronicled in "All in the Mind" (3 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138)). Finn first met the Doctor on Mynydd y Seren – where an accidental encounter with alien technology put some of 'his mind in hers' – in "Serendipity" (1 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)) and travelled to Kvitverden with him in "Ice World" (2 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)).
- Thomas Kinkade is an American artist, Hong Leung a Chinese artist: both are much given to the use of soft, pastel shades of colours in their paintings.
- The Doctor first discovered that the TARDIS doors could be opened by clicking his fingers in "Forest of the Dead" (episode 4.10, 2008).

### Chapter 8: Corridors

- If it occurs to you to wonder how anyone in the Omaron Tegwith galaxy would have heard of Schrödinger's Cat, don't forget the TARDIS would be helpfully translating the local equivalent phrase into something Finn would understand!

### Chapter 9: Catching Up

- In Greek mythology, Argus Panoptes was a giant with a hundred eyes. Sci-fi aficionados will have noticed that I've rubbed the serial numbers off and 're-originated' a concept from Arthur C Clarke's "Imperial Earth" here.. But then, as Doctor Who producer Malcolm Hulke is accredited as saying, to write science fiction, or any kind of fiction, you need a strong original idea – it doesn't have to be your strong original idea...!

### Chapter 12: Taking a Cab

- Ford Prefect and Arthur Dent are characters created by Douglas Adams in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy".
- The Doctor's remark about Ford Prefect having met the French is a reference to his question in "The Girl In The Fireplace" (episode 2.4, 2006): "Have you met the French? My **god**, they know how to party!"

### Chapter 14: Scientists and Their Theories

- The quotation here is from Robert Heinlein's novella "Lost Legacy" as included in the collection entitled "Assignment in Eternity", published in 1953 (first published in 1941 and aka "Lost Legion").

### Chapter 18: The Consequences of Being a Danger

- Finn acquired her insulation membrane on Kvitverden – see "Ice World" (2 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)). An insulation membrane keeps the body safe (if not comfortable!) at dangerously low temperatures.



## Chapter 19: Mother Planet

- *The Doctor and Martha Jones encountered the sun Torajii in “42” (episode 3.7, 2007).*

## Chapter 20: The Oncoming Storm

- *The title of this chapter is a play on the fact that ‘The Oncoming Storm’ is also a name given to the Doctor by the Daleks (see [http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/Aliases\\_of\\_the\\_Doctor](http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/Aliases_of_the_Doctor)).*

## Chapter 22: Talking to the World

- *The Doctor’s promise to Captain Jack Harkness that he would look after Finn was given in “Ice World” (2 of 7, [www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)).*

## Chapter 25: Not Nicking the Silver

- *The Tenth Doctor encountered the Weeping Angels in “Blink” (episode 3.10, 2007), and the Host Angels in “Voyage of the Damned” (episode 4.X, 2007).*

## Chapter 26: The Present

- *Marvin the Paranoid Android is another of Douglas Adams’ priceless characters in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”. Be warned: he suffers from terrible pain in all the diodes down his left side...*
- *Gaerwyn and Carys Price were Finn’s friends and hosts in the village of Cwm Seren in “Serendipity” (1 of 7, [www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)). In that same story, Finn explained how she became friends with Sarah Jane Smith.*
- *The Ninth Doctor told Rose Tyler that, some days, “everybody lives” in “The Doctor Dances” (episode 1.10, 2005).*
- *The Tenth Doctor encountered River Song in “Silence in the Library”/“Forest of the Dead” (episodes 4.9/4.10, 2008).*

## Chapter 27: The Future

- *The Doctor and Finn discovered a mutual enthusiasm for cream soda in “Ice World” (2 of 7, [www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)).*
- *Colin Pillinger BSc PhD is a planetary scientist at the Open University in the UK. He was the principal investigator for the ill-fated British Beagle 2 Mars lander project, part of the European Space Agency’s 2003 Mars Express mission. All contact with it was lost upon its separation from the Mars Express six days before its scheduled entry into the atmosphere.\**

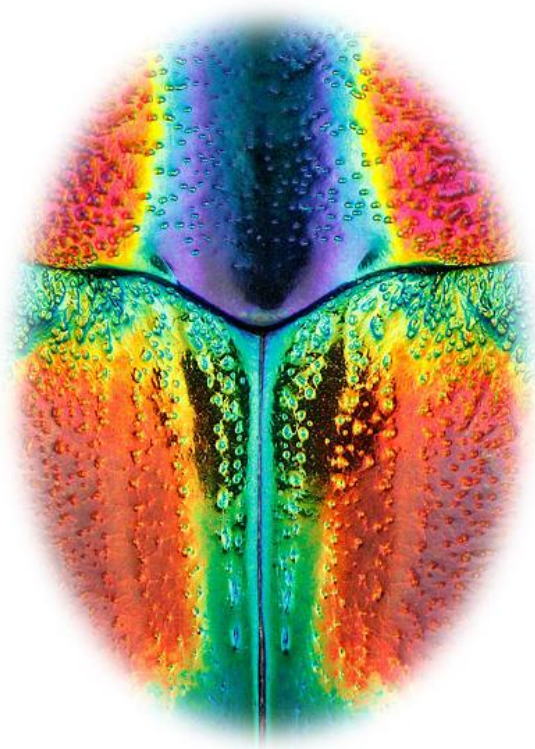
*(\* Author’s note: In January 2015, approximately five years after this story was first published on the ‘A Teaspoon and an Open Mind’ website, Beagle 2 was located intact on the surface of Mars; images provided by NASA’s Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter suggest that two of the spacecraft’s four solar panels failed to deploy, blocking the communications antenna.)*

- *Spirit and Opportunity are the two robotic rovers sent to Mars as part of NASA’s Mars Exploration Rover Mission in 2003. Spirit became stuck in 2009, and it last communicated with Earth on 22 March 2010. Opportunity has functioned effectively 30 times longer than its planned 90-sol mission (a ‘sol’ is the duration of a solar day on Mars – a mean of 24 hours, 39 minutes, 35.244 seconds!) and continues as of June 2011 to perform extensive geological analysis of Martian rocks and planetary surface features.*

- *The Doctor* acquired an orange space suit on Krop Tor in “*The Impossible Planet*”/”*The Satan Pit*” (episodes 2.8/2.9, 2006). It is apparently the same space suit he wears when he visits Mars in the year 2059 in “*The Waters of Mars*” (episode 4.16, 2009) with such dire personal consequences.

*Author’s note: I would like to make it clear that when I wrote “Felindre’s Fortune” (2011) I had not at that time seen the film “Avatar” written and directed by James Cameron. I have since (wow!), but any similarities of concept are entirely unintended and coincidental.*

[www.deborahlatham.co.uk](http://www.deborahlatham.co.uk)



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